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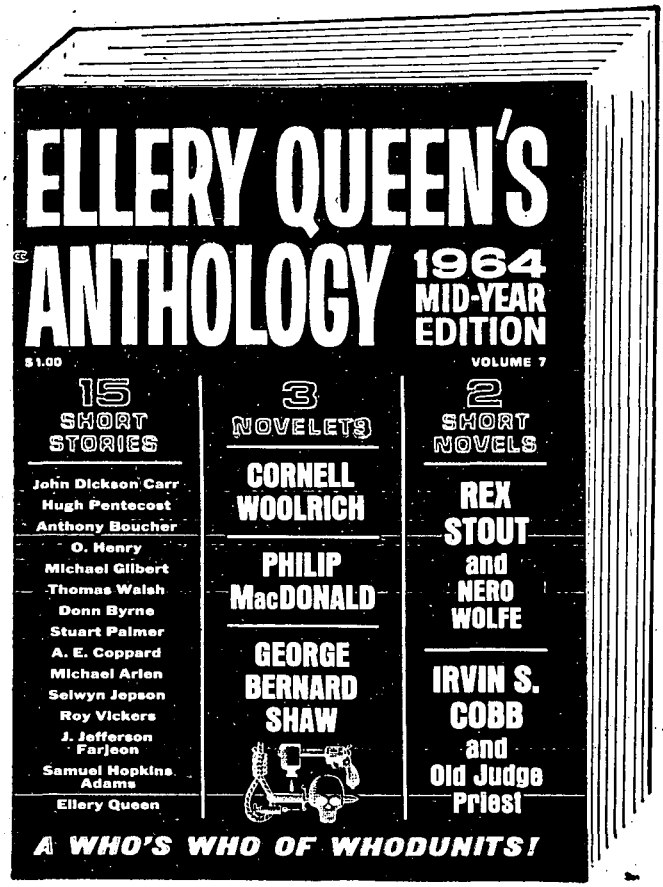

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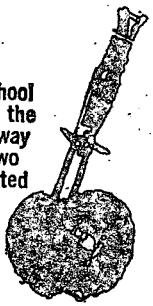

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a NEW story by **STANLEY ELLIN**

Old Mrs. Meeker, First Lady of Miami Beach, Florida, widow of the honored founder of Casuarina, had come upon economically evil days; and then the evil became the greatest peril in Mrs. Meeker's long life . . . A "different" story for and from Stanley Ellin—about a little game of cribbage and a deadly strategy: "deflate and destroy" . . .

THE GREAT PERSUADER

by STANLEY ELLIN

ON THE MORNING OF HER 75TH birthday Mrs. Meeker dallied over her usual breakfast of coffee and a cigarette while reading through the pile of congratulatory messages on the table before her. Telegrams, notes, and cards. Messages from the governor of Florida himself, from dignitaries of the city of Miami Beach, from old, old friends who nested as far north as Palm Beach and Hobe Sound.

There was even an editorial in the Miami Beach *Journal* swimming in adjectives and dedicated to her. A half century ago, it pointed out (and the choice of phrase made Mrs. Meeker feel incredibly ancient), Marcus Meeker had brought his fair young bride from the chilly north (tourists take note, thought Mrs. Meeker) to help him shape a glittering wonderland out of the sun-kissed isle of Miami Beach. Honored be his memory. Happy the birthday of the partner who had shared his triumphs, the First Lady of the city.

There was, of course, no mention of Marcus junior who in his time had provided the *Journal* with even more spectacular copy than his father. The painful memory of her long dead son rose in Mrs. Meeker. What a charmer he had been. How gay and clever and handsome. But with one fatal weakness. Where the horses were run or the cards dealt or the dice thrown, there he was simply a helpless, useless hulk, sick with the gambling madness. A lamb for the slaughter, easy pickings for the wolves. Because of them he had squandered the Meeker fortune—first his inheritance and then his mother's—had neglected his ailing wife until it was too late to do anything but mourn her death, and had made himself a stranger to his infant daughter. And finally had gone to a bloody and scandalous death, murdered in a dark alley as a lesson to others who might fail in the payment of their gambling debts.

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Yes, what an enchanting boy he had been, Mrs. Meeker thought. What a pitiful figure of a man.

She closed her mind to harrowing memories. There was other mail before her to attend to. A solemn warning from the tax commission, a heartfelt plea from the electric company, urgent reminders from various local merchants. Mrs. Meeker dutifully read them all, then contemplated her barren dining room, wondering what was left in the house to sell and what price she could hope to get for it.

Really, she told herself, it was like being captain of a luxurious ship whose fuel reserve was gone and whose precious furnishings had to be fed to the hungry boilers. It became a way of life after a while. Painful at first to see the jewelry go, and then the silver and china and curios and books and pictures and, at last, the furniture, piece by piece; but that was nothing to what her misery would be if she were forced to sell the estate and live out her remaining life elsewhere.

She smiled at the portrait of her husband on the wall. Dear brawling, arrogant Marcus who had come out of a Boston slum to carry off a Beacon Street princess. He had brought her south with the assurance that he would make his fortune here, and he had kept his word. And once the fortune was made he had built this hacienda, building by building, to her design.

Casuarina, it was named, from the grove of trees around it; and the day she saw it complete, set among casuarinas and royal palms against the pale green waters of the Gulf Stream beyond, she knew that this was where she intended to live out her life. The buildings might be shabby with decay now, but they still stood defiantly against tropical sun and wind; and this was home—this was where the heart was, and life anywhere else would be unendurable.

She was lost in these musings when her granddaughter Polly came down to breakfast, a song on her pretty lips, a birthday gift in her hand. It was a silver brooch, a profligate gift considering Polly's earnings, and Mrs. Meeker swiftly calculated that it might placate the electric company for a month or so without Polly's knowing where it had gone.

Polly was an adorable child, as her grandmother readily acknowledged; she was, along with Casuarina and a passion for cribbage, foremost among the things that still gave life meaning. But she had a head full of confetti, no doubt about it. She had failed out of the University at the end of one semester; she held her receptionist's job at the law offices of Peabody and Son only because young Duff Peabody was hopelessly infatuated with her; and at the age of twenty she had an ingenuousness about life that could be frightening at times.

But, Mrs. Meeker wondered, how

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does one cope with a breathtakingly beautiful young woman who stubbornly insisted on taking everyone in the world at face value?

Before breakfast was over, a car horn sounded, and Polly leaped to her feet.

"Which one is that?" Mrs. Meeker asked.

To her, the young louts from the University who danced attendance on Polly were indistinguishable from each other. All football players, apparently, and all astonishingly muscular, they had fallen under Polly's spell during her brief tenure at the University and now took turns driving her to her office.

"It's Frank," said Polly, "or Billy. I don't know which." She flung her arms around her grandmother and kissed her loudly. "Happy birthday again, darling, and whoever it is I'll have him pick you up later for your shopping."

After she was gone, Mrs. Meeker had Frazier, the houseman, clear the table and bring her the worn notebook containing the inventory of household belongings. As a young man, Frazier had been majordomo of Casuarina's numerous staff. Now white-haired, he was the sole remaining servant of the house—chef, butler, handyman, and sales manager all in one.

With him Mrs. Meeker combed through the inventory book deciding which of the remaining pieces of furniture must be sacrificed to demanding creditors. There were twenty rooms in the house, most of them picked clean long ago, and her heart sank at the way page after page of the inventory showed how little was left for the market. The only thing of real value remaining was the property itself, and that, it went without saying, was sacrosanct.

With this dismal business at last settled, Mrs. Meeker removed her shoes, donned a broadbrimmed straw hat and sunglasses, and walked down to the shore for solace. She was squatting at the water's edge feeding the gulls their daily ration of breadcrumbs when she saw a man leave the house and make his way through the grove of casuarinas toward her.

She stood up as he approached. He was in his middle thirties, good-looking, deeply tanned, dressed in an expensive suit. Not a bill collector, she decided warily; more the expensive lawyer type.

"Mrs. Meeker?"

"Yes."

"My name is Yaeger. Edward Yaeger. I want to offer good wishes on your birthday and to tell you what a privilege it is to meet you."

"Is it? And what's your business with me?"

Yaeger laughed. "Not my business. I represent a Mr. Leo August of Detroit. And since you evidently like to come right to the point, I'll do that. Mr. August believes you may be considering the sale of this estate, and he wants to make an offer

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for it. I'm authorized to meet any fair price you set."

"Indeed." Mrs. Meeker pointed her sharp little chin at the row of pastel and glass skyscrapers, the surprising outlines of gleaming new hotels, stretching southward into the distance. "Aren't there enough of these things around here as it is?"

"Mr. August doesn't intend adding to them. He wants this place as his residence. It won't be changed at all. It will only be restored."

"Restored? Does he know what that would cost?"

"To the penny, Mrs. Meeker."

"But why Casuarina? I'm sure he could find a dozen places as suitable."

"Because," said Yaeger, "he's looking for prestige. He's a man who made it to the top the hard way. I'd say that owning the Meeker estate would mean to him what a knighthood means to some successful junk dealer in England."

Mrs. Meeker decided that she did not like Edward Yaeger. Not only was he being impertinent to her, he was being downright disloyal to his client.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but Casuarina is not for sale. I don't know where you got the idea it was."

"Oh, come, come, Mrs. Meeker," said Yaeger playfully. "Your circumstances aren't any secret. Why not take a handsome profit while you have the chance?"

"Because this happens to be my home. So if you don't mind—"

She saw him to the driveway where his car was parked, and after he was gone she stood there surveying her domain. Everywhere were shattered windows sealed with cardboard, roofs denuded of their tiles, stuccoed walls scabrous and cracked, and rank vegetation forcing its way through broken roads and walks. The roof of the building containing the indoor swimming pool had long ago collapsed. The doors of the garage which had once held half a dozen cars hung awry on their rollers, revealing bleak emptiness within.

To anyone passing on Collins Avenue, thought Mrs. Meeker resentfully, the place must look abandoned. But it was not. It was her home, and it would remain her home.

However, she soon learned that Edward Yaeger was not one to be readily discouraged. He appeared at the house a week later while she and Polly were at an after-dinner game of cribbage, and he brought with him gaudy temptation.

"I've been in touch with Mr. August," he said, "and when he heard that you won't set a price on the estate, he decided to offer one you can't afford to turn down. A hundred thousand dollars." Yaeger was carrying a leather portfolio under his arm. Now he placed it on the table, opened it with smiling assurance. "In cash."

Polly gasped at the display of packaged banknotes before her.

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Mrs. Meeker felt somewhat unsettled by the spectacle.

"Your client does have a dramatic way of doing things, doesn't he?" she finally managed to say.

Yaeger shrugged. "He believes that cash is the great persuader. If it is, all you have to do is sign this letter of agreement for the sale of the estate."

"Isn't it risky carrying all that money around?" asked Polly with wide-eyed admiration.

"Hardly. If you look through that window at my car you'll see an unpleasant-looking gentlemen whose job is to provide an ounce of prevention. He's one of Mr. August's most loyal employees, and not only is he armed with a gun, but he would have no objection to using it."

"Horrible," said Mrs. Meeker. "Incredible. All this money, an armed bodyguard—really, your Mr. August is too much for me. If I ever did sell Casuarina, it wouldn't be to someone like that. But, as I've already made plain, I don't intend selling."

It was hard to convince Yaeger that she really meant it—in fact, it was hard to convince herself in the face of the offering before her—and that was bad enough. What was worse was Polly's naive regard of Yaeger, the unabashed interest she was taking in him. He was, Mrs. Meeker realized with concern, something new to the girl—an older man, attractive, urbane, overwhelmingly sure of himself. For his part, it was evident that he had taken close note of Polly with a coolly appraising eye and liked what he saw. Liked it a great deal.

When he finally accepted temporary defeat, he turned his attention to the playing cards and pegboard on the table, obviously looking for an excuse to dally.

"It's cribbage," said Mrs. Meeker shortly. "I gather you don't play."

"No, but I'm a quick learner at cards. Show me the game, and I'll prove it."

"Isn't there someone waiting for you in your car?"

"He'll wait," Yaeger said. "Waiting is his business."

So, short of flagrant bad manners, there was nothing to do but show him the game. In truth, as Mrs. Meeker explained the rules she found herself softening a little toward him. He listened intently, asked shrewd questions, and what more could any devotee of cribbage want than a willing convert? When the time came for a demonstration she shuffled the deck and placed it before him. He cut, and she shook her head reprovingly at him.

"In cribbage," she said, "one never cuts the cards even when offered them. It means a penalty of two points. Of course, I won't take the penalty now since it's your first game, but please do remember."

"I'll try to," said Yaeger, his eyes on Polly.

As he had remarked, he was a quick learner. At the start, unsure

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of the best discards, he made several blunders. Then he gave Mrs. Meeker an honest run for her money, losing the first game by a wide margin, but very nearly winning the second. And all this, Mrs. Meeker observed, while he kept up a half flirtatious dialogue with Polly. It was dismaying to watch the nonchalant skill with which he simultaneously handled both his cards and her moonstruck granddaughter. Somehow it seemed to deprecate cribbage and Polly together, just as the cash thrust under her nose had deprecated the true value of Casuarina to her.

All in all, it was a most disturbing evening.

Others followed. Yaeger came again and again to renew his client's offer, to play cribbage, to court Polly. It led Mrs. Meeker to wonder if she should not bar him from the house. But on what grounds? As for appealing to Polly, that would be useless. All you had to do was look at Polly while in the man's company to see how useless.

So there was only one satisfaction to be gained from Edward Yaeger's intrusion on the scene. He became a superb cribbage player, and, as Mrs. Meeker guiltily knew, a good game of cribbage was as heady for her as fine old wine. Other card games had never interested her. Cribbage, she would point out, was the only true test of guile and nerve. The trouble had always been in finding an opponent of proper mettle, but now in Edward Yaeger she had one. Although he lost more often than he won, he made every game a challenge.

She began to relish those nightly duels with him. Nothing had tasted as sweet in a long time as the moment of pegging another victory over this formidable adversary. And to give up this pleasure because she was vaguely repelled by his cocksure manner, his disdainfully smiling self-assurance—well, she couldn't. Simply couldn't.

But she was not unprepared for dire revelation when it came. It was young Duff Peabody who brought it. His father had handled Marcus senior's legal affairs, and Duff had inherited not only the law office but a vested interest in the Meeker family. Especially Polly. As he had once frankly admitted to Mrs. Meeker, having Polly working for him was a perpetual torment. For one thing, she was gaily and totally incompetent at her work; for another, her presence addled him completely. As far as he could see, the only solution was marriage to her, but, alas, Polly remained deaf to all his pleas.

Now he suddenly arrived at Casuarina on a lowering, gusty afternoon when Mrs. Meeker was at the water's edge attending to the gulls who flocked around her. He was in a really bad state, Mrs. Meeker saw, and she let the gulls fend for themselves while she heard him out. It was a damned mess, he

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said. Luckily, Polly was innocently pleased to reveal her intention of marrying this thug—

"Thug?" said Mrs. Meeker in alarm. "Marry?"

"Yes," said Duff, "that's the word she used—marry. And now that I've taken the trouble to look him up, I can tell you that your friend Yaeger is no better than a thug. The man he works for, Leo August, is a racketeer who runs a gambling syndicate behind a big-business façade. Yaeger is his front man in these parts. Not that he's fak ng a good background and education. He has all of that, and that's exactly what he sold to August. From what I was told, August yearns to get into the social swim. People like Yaeger impress him."

Mrs. Meeker found herself both angry and frightened. "But it's all so obvious now. That large amount of cash. That ugly little man who's always waiting in the car—"

"Yes, that's August's pet gunman, Joe Michalik. He's got a few murders to his credit, if not on his record."

"Does Polly know all this? Have you told her?"

"Of course. And when she put it to Yaeger he laughed it off. Made it look as if I was the jealous suitor trying to get rid of him."

"But she knows what men like that did to her father. I've never kept it a secret from her."

"And she refuses to draw any connection. As far as she's concerned, Yaeger is the most glamorous thing that's ever come her way, and that's it. It's impossible to talk to her."

"How awful. Duff, we must do something. What can we do?"

"You mean, what can you do. Well, all this may be Yaeger's way of pressuring you into selling the estate. What if you make a deal with him? You sell him Casuarina, and he says goodbye to Polly."

"Would someone like that keep any such bargain? And suppose he tells Polly I tried to buy him off? Can you imagine how she'd react? No, there must be some other way."

But, Mrs. Meeker knew, easier said than done. She stood there in despair while the gulls wheeled overhead screeching for their dinner, while lacy edges of the tide lapped at her bare feet. On an incoming wavelet rode the pale, blue-fringed bladder of a Portuguese man-of-war, and Mrs. Meeker shudderingly backed away as the garish scarlet and purple of the creature's pulpy body, the slender black threads of its deadly tentacles washed ashore. These men-of-war were old enemies. She had once been stung by one while swimming, and it had felt like a white-hot iron playing over her arm. It had been an agonizing two days before the pain receded, and ever since then she had waged unremitting war on any of the pulps that came into her ken.

Now she looked with disgust at this one helpless on the sand, its bladder inflated and swaying back and forth in the warm breeze.

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"Do fetch me that stick of driftwood, Duff," she ordered, and when he had, she thrust it hard into the bladder which collapsed with a pop.

"The object," she said, "is to deflate and then destroy."

She carried the slimy residue of pulp inshore on the stick and buried it deep in the sand, leaving the stick as a grave marker. "Deflate and destroy," she said thoughtfully, staring at the upright stick while Duff watched her in puzzlement.

She suddenly turned to him. "Duff, I'm going to have a party."

"A party?"

"Yes, this coming Saturday. And you're to be there with a bill of sale for the estate. Can you prepare one on such short notice?"

"I suppose so. But what made you—?"

"Oh, do stop asking questions." Mrs. Meeker knit her brow in concentration. "And I'll have Polly invite her football-playing friends and some pretty girls. And, of course, Mr. Yaeger and that nasty little associate of his—"

"Michalik?"

"Yes. And as for a collation—well, Frazier will have to persuade our shopkeeper friends to extend their credit just a bit further. That means we can have a buffet, then dancing afterwards, and perhaps games."

"With Yaeger and Michalik running them, of course," Duff said grimly. "You sound as if you've gone completely out of your mind."

"Do I?" said Mrs. Meeker. "Well, perhaps I do"—which, to Duff's bafflement and concern were her last words on the subject.

She was not minded to offer further enlightenment when Duff arrived at the party Saturday evening. The patio and rooms fronting it were brightly lit and filled with young people alternating between dance floor and buffet. Yaeger and Polly were intent on each other; Michalik, gray-faced, stony-eyed, and dour, leaned against a wall and surveyed the proceedings with contempt; and Mrs. Meeker was being royalty in a light mood, apparently delighted to find Casuarina once again alive with company and music.

She drew Duff aside. "Do you have the bill of sale ready?"

"Yes, but I still don't know why. You said yourself that selling won't really settle matters."

"So I did, but you must have faith in me, dear boy." Mrs. Meeker patted his hand. "Remember that man-of-war on the beach? I handled it quite competently, didn't I?"

"It's hardly the same thing."

"Perhaps you're wrong. Meanwhile, Duff, your job this evening is to stand by me. What I intend to do may seem foolhardy, but you're not to put any obstacles in my way."

"If I only knew what you intended—"

"You'll know soon enough."

Mrs. Meeker left him glowering

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and went about her business of playing hostess. She bided her time. The cool night breeze rose, couples abandoned the patio and crowded indoors. The hour grew late. And so, Mrs. Meeker told herself, it is now or never. She took a deep breath and moved serenely smiling, toward Yeager who had a possessive arm around Polly's waist.

"Enjoying yourselves?" Mrs. Meeker asked, and Yaeger said, "Very much. But as for our business—"

"I have the papers ready. And I suppose you have the money here?"

"I have. If you don't mind leaving the festivities for a few minutes, we can close the deal right now."

Mrs. Meeker sighed. "I can't say I do mind. I'm afraid I'm not up to parties like this any more. My idea of a good time is a little game of cribbage. Dear me, how angry Polly's grandfather would get when I lured someone into a game during a party. He always felt it was the worst of bad manners, but I could never resist the temptation."

"No reason why you should," said Yaeger with heavy gallantry. "If you want a game right now, I'm your man."

"How kind of you. That table is all arranged. The noise in the room won't bother you, will it?"

Yaeger laughed. "Yes, I noticed that table before. I had a feeling we'd come to this before the night was over."

"You're an old conspirator," Polly told her grandmother fondly. "You really are, darling."

"Oh, sticks and stones," said Mrs. Meeker. As she sat down and opened the deck of cards, she was pleased to see that interested onlookers were gathering around the table—among them Duff Peabody and the dour Michalik. "When it comes to cribbage I don't at all mind being humored. How far would you go in humoring me, Mr. Yaeger?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I mean, would you mind playing for stakes? I've never done it in all my life, and the idea seems quite exciting."

"All right, I leave the stakes to you. A dime, a dollar—"

"Oh, more than that."

"How much more?"

Mrs. Meeker riffled the cards. She set them neatly on the table before her. "I should like to play you one game," she said smilingly, "for a hundred thousand dollars."

Even at this, she saw, Yaeger did not lose his poise. In the midst of the surprised clamor that rose around the table he sat observing her with an amused curl to his lips.

"Are you serious?" he said.

"Entirely. Your Mr. August is eager to get possession of this estate, isn't he?"

"He is."

"And I am just as eager to lay my hands on some money. A large amount of money. I think it would

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be entertaining to settle the matter over the cribbage board. Therefore, I'll wager the signed bill of sale for Casuarina against your hundred thousand dollars. If I lose, Mr. August gets the estate, and you, of course, would have the money for yourself."

"And suppose he loses?" Michalik interposed in a hard voice. He turned to Yaeger. "Forget it, big-shot. You don't play games with August's money. Understand?"

The smile vanished from Yaeger's face. "Michalik, remember that you're hired help. When I want your advice, I'll ask for it."

"But he's right," said Duff Peabody. "Mrs. Meeker, this is out of the question." He appealed to Polly. "Don't you agree? Don't you have something to say about this?"

"I don't know," Polly said unhappily. She stood with a hand on Yaeger's shoulder as if drawing strength from him. "After all, Casuarina isn't mine."

"And that money isn't yours," Michalik told Yaeger contemptuously. "So don't take any chances with it."

It was, Mrs. Meeker knew, the worst way to handle any male as arrogant as Edward Yaeger. And, as she could see, Leo August had been right. Cash was the great persuader. In Yaeger's eyes was a visible hunger for that money.

Still he hesitated. But he was wavering. Mrs. Meeker said, "Do you know, in all our games I've had the feeling you were humoring an old woman, that you weren't really playing to beat her at any cost. Now I wonder. Do you admit that I'm the better player? Is that it?"

Yaeger set his jaw. "Do you know what you're letting yourself in for? This isn't like playing for matchsticks."

"Of course."

"And if I win, August gets this bill of sale and I get the money. If you win—"

"Winner take all," said Mrs. Meeker. "Those are the terms."

"One game?"

"One game, and that settles it."

"All right," said Yaeger. "High card deals."

It was only when she picked up her first hand that Mrs. Meeker realized the full enormity of what she was doing.

Up to now she had not allowed herself to think of losing, to think of giving up Casuarina lock, stock, and barrel, and of making herself dependent on someone's charity for survival. Whose, she had no idea, but someone's it would obviously have to be. The thought was so unnerving that she discarded too cautiously, fell squarely into the trap Yaeger had set for her, and at the end of the first deal was already behind in score.

Watching his imperturbable expression, his deft handling of the cards, made it worse. She had meant what she told him. In their previous matches he had never

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seemed to extend himself. He had always been paying as much attention to Polly as to the game, and even then he had been a tough opponent. Now, relaxed in his chair, his eyes fixed with absolute concentration on his cards, he took on frightening dimensions.

Mrs. Meeker found herself suddenly weak with apprehension. Her fingers, when she dealt, were clumsy. He was a professional—that was what it was. He would never have accepted the challenge unless he knew the odds favored him. So she had baited her trap perfectly—and now had a tiger by the tail.

By this time everyone in the room had gathered around the table, silently watching. Not many understood the game, Mrs. Meeker knew, but all could follow the progress of the pegs moving along the scoreboard—Yaeger's red peg now far ahead, her white peg pursuing it feebly.

They played out the deal swiftly, the tension rising around them. Yaeger turned over his cards. "Fifteen two, four, six, and a pair makes eight." The pegboard clicked merrily as he measured off his eight points.

Mrs. Meeker matched his score and sighed with relief that at least she had held her own for that deal. Now for the crib, the two discards from each player, which was tallied to the dealer's score. It took only a glance for her to see that there wasn't a point in it. It was as if Yaeger had read her mind. Perhaps he had. He knew she would be discarding recklessly to make up lost ground, and he was prepared for that.

She changed her tactics. At the halfway mark she had made a little headway; then a lucky deal came her way, a twenty-point hand, and now the white peg was only a short distance behind the red one.

But no sign of concern showed on Yaeger's face.

"Fifteen two," he said, "and a pair makes four."

It was not his face she should have been watching as he pegged his score. It was Polly who said to him with surprise, "Oh, no, you've only made four points. You've given yourself five," and reached for the red peg.

Yaeger's hand caught Polly's wrist in a sudden hard grasp—how hard was easy to tell from her look of alarm. Then the grip was immediately relaxed. Yaeger showed his teeth in a smile. "I'm sorry, dear. I thought it was your mistake, but you were right. Go ahead, put the peg where it belongs."

"Thank you," said Polly in a strange voice. "I will." And after she had done so, Mrs. Meeker saw with gratitude, Polly no longer leaned tenderly close to the man, her hand on his shoulder.

There was not much else to be grateful for. Yaeger, his face growing taut with strain, his eyes narrowed, discarded flawlessly and

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played his cards brilliantly. Mrs. Meeker, knowing that she must look as drawn with strain, drew even with him, and that was all. One point from victory, the two pegs stood side by side.

One point, thought Mrs. Meeker as she gathered the cards together, preparing to deal. One point—and winner take all.

She riffled the deck, did it again, did it once more. Then she slapped it down sharply on the table before Yaeger. Automatically, he cut the cards. Mrs. Meeker watched him do this, then with great deliberation reached out to place her peg across the finish line.

"Two points penalty for cutting the cards," she said sweetly, "and game."

It took Yaeger a moment to comprehend what had happened. Then he rose from his chair. "You old biddy," he whispered, "you tricked me into that."

"Did I?"

"You tricked me into it. That means the bet is off. Nobody wins and nobody loses."

"You're wrong, Mr. Yaeger. You lost and must pay. I learned long ago by bitter experience that one must always pay his gambling debts."

"All right, if that's the way you want it, consider yourself paid. And since Polly and I are getting married, consider this money your wedding present to us. Now Mr. Michalik will take charge of it. He'll be very unhappy otherwise."

"Who cares about that?" said Polly furiously. "As for marrying you—"

Her voice failed. In his hand Michalik was holding a gun. It was not very large and it was not flourished with menace, but it was clearly and indisputably a gun ready for use. And it was, Mrs. Meeker saw, one of Polly's huge football players who almost indifferently knocked the gun out of Michalik's hand as the bodyguard reached over the table to gather in the money. Others, even bigger and brawnier than the first, surrounded Michalik and took ungentle charge of him.

"Little man," said the biggest and brawniest, Frank or Billy or whoever he was, "the party's over. It's time for you to go."

Michalik struggled wildly and futilely as he was borne to the door; but he managed to point a quivering finger at Yaeger.

"Not without him!" he cried. "You hear me? Not without him. Just give him to me. That's all I want."

The news of Edward Yaeger's murder broke in the Miami Beach *Journal* a few days later. Mrs. Meeker read it with equanimity; Polly seemed badly shaken by it. No matter, thought Mrs. Meeker comfortably, she's young and healthy, and with Duff Peabody on hand for solace, she'll soon recover. For herself, she went down to the

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shore to enjoy the familiar scene with new zest.

She was there when Duff came scrambling down the sandy slope to the beach, bringing with him a tall, shy young man who seemed uncomfortably conscious of being in the presence of royalty.

"This is Detective Morrissey," Duff said. "After I saw the paper this morning I had a long talk with him. He's working on the Yaeger case and wants to hear your story about what happened the other night. He just booked Michalik for the killing, and he thinks he can land Leo August as the one who gave the orders for it, if Michalik can be made to talk."

"Indeed?" said Mrs. Meeker. "And what about the money?"

"Oh, it's all yours, ma'am," said Detective Morrissey earnestly. "I mean, unofficially speaking, there sure won't be anybody else to claim it. You can take my word it's all yours." Then he said with concern, "Ma'am, hadn't you better come away from there? You don't have shoes on and those things can sting like fury."

Mrs. Meeker raised her eyebrows at the man-of-war drifting toward her on the ripples of the placid sea.

"Not at all," she said graciously. "Really, these creatures are no trouble at all when you know how to handle them."

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a new police procedural story

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	LAWRENCE TREAT
TITLE:	*H As in Homicide*
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVES:	Mitch Taylor and others
LOCALE:	United States
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*The second in a new series of police procedural stories . . . A "missing girl" case with plenty of clues and suspects and down-to-earth details—but a case that came to a dead stop . . .*

SHE CAME THROUGH THE DOOR OF the Homicide Squad's outer office as if it were disgrace to be there, as if she didn't like it, as if she hadn't done anything wrong—and never could or would.

Still, here she was. About twenty-two years old and underweight. Wearing a pink, sleeveless dress. She had dark hair pulled back in a bun; her breasts were close together; and her eyes ate you up.

Mitch Taylor had just come back from lunch and was holding down the fort all alone. He nodded at her and said, "Anything I can do?"

"Yes. I—I—" Mitch put her down as a nervous stutterer and waited for her to settle down. "They told me to come here," she said. "I went to the neighborhood police station and they said they couldn't do anything, that I had to come here."

"Yeah," Mitch said. It was the old run-around and he was willing to bet this was Pulasky's doing, up in the Third Precinct. He never took a complaint unless the rule book said, "You, Pulasky—you got to handle this or you'll lose your pension."

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So Mitch said, "Sure. What's the trouble?"

"I don't like to bother you and I hope you don't think I'm silly, but—well, my friend left me. And I don't know where, or why."

"Boy friend?" Mitch said.

She blushed a deep crimson. "Oh, no! A real *friend*. We were traveling together and she took the car and went, without even leaving me a note. I can't understand it."

"Let's go inside and get the details," Mitch said.

He brought her into the Squad Room and sat her down at a desk. She looked up shyly, sort of impressed with him. He didn't know why, because he was only an average-looking guy, of medium height, on the cocky side, with stiff, wiry hair and a face nobody remembered, particularly.

He sat down opposite her and took out a pad and pencil. "Your name?" he said.

"Prudence Gilford."

"Address?"

"New York City, but I gave up my apartment there."

"Where I come from, too. Quite a ways from home, aren't you?"

"I'm on my way to California—my sister lives out there. I answered an ad in the paper—just a moment, I think I still have it." She fumbled in a big, canvas bag, and the strap broke off and the whole business dropped. She picked it up awkwardly, blushing again, but she kept on talking. "Bella Tansey advertised for somebody to share the driving to California. She said she'd pay all expenses. It was a wonderful chance for me . . . Here, I have it."

She took out the clipping and handed it to Mitch. It was the usual thing: woman companion to share the driving, and a phone number.

"So you got in touch?" Mitch prodded.

"Yes. We liked each other immediately, and arranged to go the following week."

She was fiddling with the strap, trying to fix it, and she finally fitted the tab over some kind of button. Mitch, watching, wondered how long *that* was going to last.

Meanwhile she was still telling him about Bella Tansey. "We got along so well," Prudence said, "and last night we stopped at a motel—The Happy Inn, it's called—and we went to bed. When I woke up, she was gone."

"Why did you stop there?" Mitch asked sharply.

"We were tired and it had a Vacancy sign." She drew in her breath and asked anxiously, "Is there something wrong with it?"

"Not too good a reputation," Mitch said. "Did she take all her things with her? Her overnight stuff, I mean."

"Yes, I think so. Or at least, she took her bag."

Mitch got a description of the car: a dark blue Buick; 1959 or 1960, she wasn't sure; New York plates but she didn't know the number.

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"Okay," Mitch said. "We'll check. We'll send out a flier and have her picked up and find out why she left in such a hurry."

Prudence Gilford's eyes got big. "Yes," she said. "And please, can you help me? I have only five dollars and the motel is expensive. I can't stay there and I don't know where to go."

"Leave it to me," Mitch said. "I'll fix it up at the motel and get you a place in town for a while. You can get some money, can't you?"

"Oh, yes. I'll write my sister for it."

"Better wire," Mitch said. "And will you wait here a couple of minutes? I'll be right back."

"Of course."

Lieutenant Decker had come in and was working on something in his tiny office which was jammed up with papers and stuff. Mitch reported on the Gilford business and the Lieutenant listened.

"Pulasky should have handled it," Mitch said, finishing up. "But what the hell—The kid's left high and dry, so maybe we could give her a little help."

"What do you think's behind this?" Decker asked.

"I don't know," Mitch said. "She's a clinger—scared of everything and leans on people. Maybe the Tansey woman got sick and tired of her, or maybe this is lesbian stuff. Hard to tell."

"Well, go ahead with an S-4 for the Buick. It ought to be on a main highway and within a five-hundred-mile radius. Somebody'll spot it. We'll see what cooks."

Mitch drove Prudence out to the motel and told her to get her things. While she was busy, he went into the office and spoke to Ed Hiller, who ran the joint. Hiller, a tall, stoop-shouldered guy who'd been in and out of jams most of his life, was interested in anything from a nickel up, but chiefly up. He rented cabins by the hour, day, or week, and you could get liquor if you paid the freight; but most of his trouble came from reports of cars that had been left unlocked and rifled. The police had never been able to pin anything on him.

He said, "Hello, Taylor. Anything wrong?"

"Just want to know about a couple of dames that stayed here last night—Bella Tansey and Prudence Gilford. Tansey pulled out during the night."

"Around midnight," Ed said. "She came into the office to make a phone call, and a little later I heard her car pull out."

Time for the missing girl to pack, Mitch decided. So far, everything checked. "Who'd she call?" he asked. "What did she say?"

Hiller shrugged. "I don't listen in," he said. "I saw her open the door and then I heard her go into the phone booth. I mind my own business. You know that."

"Yeah," Mitch said flatly. "You

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heard the coins drop, didn't you? Local call, or long distance?"

Hiller leaned over the counter. "Local," he said softly. "I think."

"Got their registration?" Mitch asked. Hiller nodded and handed Mitch the sheet, which had a record of the New York license plates.

That was about all there was to it. Nobody picked up Bella Tansey and her Buick, Prudence Gilford was socked away in a rooming house in town, and Mitch never expected to see her again.

When he got home that night, Amy kissed him and asked him about things, and then after he'd horsed around with the kids a little, she showed him a letter from her sister. Her sister's husband was on strike and what the union paid them took care of food and rent and that was about all; but they had to keep up their payments on the car and the new dishwasher, and the TV had broken down again, and could Mitch and Amy help out for a little while—they'd get it back soon.

So after the kids were in bed, Mitch and Amy sat down on the sofa to figure things out, which took about two seconds and came to fifty bucks out of his next pay check. It was always like that with the two of them: they saw things the same way and never had any arguments. Not many guys were as lucky as Mitch.

The next morning Decker had his usual conference with the Homicide Squad and went over all the cases they had in the shop. The only thing he said about the Gilford business was, the next time Pulasky tried to sucker them, figure it out so he had to come down here, personally, and then make him sweat.

Mitch drew a couple of minor assault cases to investigate, and he'd finished up with one and was on his way to the other when the call came in on his radio. Go out to French Woods, on East Road. They had a homicide and it looked like the missing Tansey woman.

He found a couple of police cars and an oil truck and the usual bunch of snoopers who had stopped out of curiosity. There was a kind of rough trail going into the woods. A couple of hundred yards in, the Lieutenant and a few of the boys and Jub Freeman, the lab technician, were grouped around a dark blue car. It didn't take any heavy brainwork to decide it was the Tansey Buick.

When Mitch got to the car, he saw Bella Tansey slumped in the front seat with her head resting against the window. The right hand door was open and so was the glove compartment, and Decker was looking at the stuff he'd found there.

He gave Mitch the main facts. "Truck driver spotted the car, went in to look, and then got in touch with us. We've been here about fifteen minutes, and the Medical Examiner ought to show up pretty soon. She was strangled—

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you can see the marks on her neck—and I'll bet a green hat that it happened the night before last, not long after she left the motel."

Mitch surveyed the position of the body with a practiced eye. "She wasn't driving, either. She was pushed in there, after she was dead."

"Check," Decker said. Very carefully, so that he wouldn't spoil any possible fingerprints, he slid the junk he'd been examining onto the front seat. He turned to Jub Freeman, who was delicately holding a handbag by the two ends and scrutinizing it for prints.

"Find anything?" the Lieutenant asked.

"Nothing," Jub said. "But the initials on it are B.T.W."

"Bella Tansey What?" the Lieutenant said. He didn't laugh and neither did anybody else. He stooped to put his hands on the door sill, leaned forward, and stared at the body. Mitch, standing behind him, peered over his head.

Bella had been around thirty and she'd been made for men. She was wearing a blue dress with a thing that Amy called a bolero top, and, except where the skirt had pulled up maybe from moving the body, her clothes were not disturbed. The door of the glove compartment and parts of the dashboard were splotched with fingerprint powder.

Mitch pulled back and waited. After about a minute the Lieutenant stood up.

"Doesn't look as if there was a sex angle," Decker said. "And this stuff—" he kicked at the dry leaves that covered the earth "—doesn't take footprints. If we're lucky, we'll find somebody who saw the killer somewhere around here." He made a smacking sound with his thin, elastic lips and watched Jub.

Jub had taken off his coat and dumped the contents of the pocketbook onto it. Mitch spotted nothing unusual—just the junk women usually carried; but he didn't see any money. Jub was holding the purse and rummaging inside it.

"Empty?" the Lieutenant asked sharply.

Jub nodded. "Except for one nickel. She must have had money, so whoever went through this missed up on five cents."

"Couldn't be Ed Hiller, then," Mitch said, and the gang laughed.

"Let's say the motive was robbery," Decker said. "We got something of a head start on this, but brother, it's a bad one. Why does a woman on her way to California make a phone call and then sneak off in the middle of the night? Leaving her girl friend in the lurch, too. Doesn't sound like robbery now, does it?"

"Sounds like a guy," Mitch said. "She had a late date, and the guy robbed her, instead of—"

"We'll talk to Ed Hiller about that later," the Lieutenant said. "Taylor, you better get going on this. Call New York and get a line

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on her. Her friends, her background. If she was married. How much money she might have had with her. Her bank might help on that."

"Right," Mitch said.

"And then get hold of the Gilford dame and pump her," Decker said.

Mitch nodded. He glanced into the back of the car and saw the small overnight bag. "That," he said, pointing. "She packed, so she didn't expect to go back to the motel. But she didn't put her bag in the trunk compartment, so she must have expected to check in somewhere else, and pretty soon."

"She'd want to sleep somewhere, wouldn't she?" Decker asked.

"That packing and unpacking doesn't make sense," Mitch said.

Decker grunted. "Homicides never do," he said grimly.

Mitch drove back to headquarters thinking about that overnight bag, and it kept bothering him. He didn't know exactly why, but it was the sort of thing you kept in the back of your mind until something happened or you found something else, and then everything clicked and you got a pattern.

But, what with organizing the questions to ask New York, he couldn't do much doping out right now. Besides, there was a lot more information to come in.

He got New York on the phone and they said they'd move on it right away; so he hung up and went to see Prudence. He was lucky to find her in.

She was shocked at the news, but she had nothing much to contribute. "We didn't know each other very long," she said, "and I was asleep when she left. I was so tired. We'd been driving all day, and I'd done most of it."

"Did she mention knowing anybody around—anybody in town?" Mitch asked. Prudence shook her head, but he put her through the wringer anyhow—it was easy for people to hear things and then forget them. You had to jog their memories a little. And besides, how could he be sure she was telling all she knew?

He felt sorry for her, though—she looked kind of thin and played out, as if she hadn't been eating much. So he said, "That five bucks of yours isn't going to last too long, and if you need some dough—"

"Oh, thanks!" she said, sort of glowing and making him feel that Mitch Taylor, he was okay. "Oh, thanks! It's perfectly wonderful of you, but I have enough for a while, and I'm sure my sister will send me the money I wired her for."

By that afternoon most of the basic information was in. Locally, the Medical Examiner said that Bella Tansey had been strangled with a towel or a handkerchief; he placed the time as not long after she'd left the motel. The Lieutenant had questioned Ed Hiller without being able to get anything "hot."

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Hiller insisted he hadn't left the motel, but his statement depended only on his own word.

Jub had used a vacuum cleaner on the car and examined the findings with a microscope, and he'd shot enough pictures to fill a couple of albums.

"They stopped at a United Motel the first night," he recapitulated, "and they had dinner at a Howard Johnson place. They ate sandwiches in the car, probably for lunch, and they bought gas in Pennsylvania and Indiana, and the car ate up oil. There was a gray kitten on the rear seat some time or other. They both drove. Bella Tansey had ear trouble and she bought her clothes at Saks Fifth Avenue. I can tell you a lot more about her, but I'm damned if I've uncovered anything that will help on the homicide. No trace in that car of anybody except the two women."

The New York police, however, came up with a bombshell. Bella Tansey had drawn $1800 from her bank, in cash, and she'd been married to Clyde Warhouse and they'd been divorced two years ago. She'd used her maiden name—Tansey.

"Warhouse!" the Lieutenant said.

Everybody knew that name. He ran a column in the local paper—he called it "Culture Corner"—and he covered art galleries, visiting orchestras, and egghead lecturers. Whenever he had nothing else to write about, he complained how archaic the civic architecture was.

"That's why she had the W on her bag," Mitch said. "Bella Tansey Warhouse. And Ed Hiller didn't lie about the phone call. She made it all right—to her ex-husband."

Decker nodded. "Let's say she hotfooted it out to see him. Let's say she still had a yen for him and they scrapped, that he got mad and lost his head and strangled her. But why would he take her dough? She must've had around seventeen hundred with her. Why would he rob her?"

"Why not?" Mitch said. "It was there, wasn't it?"

"Let's think about this," Decker said. "Prudence says Bella unpacked. Did Bella start to go to bed, or what?"

"Prudence doesn't know," Mitch said. "I went into that for all it was worth, and Prudence *assumes* Bella unpacked—she can't actually remember. Says she was bushed and went right to sleep. Didn't even wash her face."

"Well," Decker said, "I guess Warhouse is wondering when we'll get around to him. I'll check on him while you go up there." The Lieutenant's jaw set firmly. "Bring him in."

Mitch rolled his shoulders, tugged on the lapels of his jacket, and went out. The first time you hit your suspect, it could make or break the case.

Clyde Warhouse lived in a red brick house with tall white columns

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on the front. Mitch found him at home, in his study. He was a little guy with big teeth, and he didn't really smile; he just pulled his lips back, and you could take it any way you pleased.

Warhouse came right to the point. "You're here about my former wife," he said. "I just heard about it on the radio, and I wish I could give you some information, but I can't. It's certainly not the end I wished for her."

"What kind of end were you hoping for?" Mitch asked.

"None." The Warhouse lips curled back, telling you how smart he was. "And certainly not one in this town"

"Let's not kid around," Mitch said. "You're coming back with me. You know that, don't you?"

The guy almost went down with the first punch. "You mean—you mean I'm being arrested?"

"What do *you* think?" Mitch said. "We know she phoned you and you met her. We know you saw her."

"But I didn't see her," Warhouse said. "She never showed up."

Mitch didn't even blink.

"How long did you wait?" he asked.

"Almost an hour. Maybe more."

"Where?"

"On the corner of Whitman and Cooper." Warhouse gasped, then put his head in his hands and said, "Oh, God!" And that was all Mitch could get out of him until they had him in the Squad Room, with Decker leading off on the interrogation.

The guy didn't back down from that first admission. He knew he'd been tricked, but he stuck to his guns and wouldn't give another inch. He said Bella had called him around midnight and said she must see him. He hadn't known she was in town, didn't want to see her, had no interest in her, but he couldn't turn her down. So he went, and he waited. And waited and waited. And then went home.

They kept hammering away at him. First, Mitch and Decker, then Bankhart and Balenky, then Mitch and Decker again.

In between, they consulted Jub. He'd been examining Warhouse's car for soil that might match samples from French Woods; for evidence of a struggle, of Bella's presence—of anything at all. The examination drew a blank. Warhouse grinned his toothy grin and kept saying no. And late that night they gave up on him, brought him across the courtyard to the city jail, and left him there for the night. He needed sleep—and so did the Homicide Squad.

At the conference the next morning, Decker was grim. "We have an ex-wife calling her ex-husband at midnight and making an appointment; we have his statement that he went and she never showed up; and we have a homicide and that's all."

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"The dough," Bankhart said.

Decker nodded. "When we find that seventeen hundred, then we might have a case. We'll get warrants and we'll look for it, but let's assume we draw another blank. Then what?"

"Let's have another session with Ed Hiller," Mitch said.

They had it, and they had a longer one with Warhouse, and they were still nowhere. They'd gone into the Warhouse background thoroughly. He earned good money, paid his bills promptly, and got along well with his second wife. He liked women, they went for him, and he was a humdinger with them, although he was not involved in any scandal. But in Mitch's book, he'd humdinged once too often. Still, you had to prove it.

For a while they concentrated on The Happy Inn. But the motel guests either couldn't be found, because they'd registered under fake names with fake license numbers, or else they said they'd been asleep and had no idea what was going on outside.

The usual tips came in—crank stuff that had to be followed up. The killer had been seen, somebody had heard Bella scream for help, somebody else had had a vision. Warhouse had been spotted waiting on the corner, which proved nothing except he'd arrived there first. Every tip checked out either as useless or a phony. The missing $1700 didn't show up. Decker ran out of jokes, and Mitch came home tired and irritable.

The case was at full stop.

Then Decker had this wild idea, and he told it to Jub and Mitch. "My wife says I woke up last night and asked for a drink of water, and I don't even remember it."

"So you were thirsty," Mitch remarked.

"Don't you get it?" Decker exclaimed. "People wake up, then go back to sleep, and in the morning they don't even know they were awake. Well, we know Bella packed her bag, and she was in that motel room with Prudence and must have made some noise and possibly even talked. I'll bet a pair of pink panties that Prudence woke up, and then forgot all about it. She has a clue buried deep in her mind."

"Granted," Jub said, "but how are you going to dig it up?"

"I'll hypnotize her," Decker said, with fire in his eyes. "I'll ask a psychiatrist to get her to free-associate. Taylor, ask her to come in tomorrow morning, when my mind is fresh. And hers, too."

Mitch dropped in on Prudence and gave her the message, but the way he saw things, the Lieutenant was sure reaching for it—far out. Mitch told Amy about this screwy idea of Decker's, but all she said was that tomorrow was payday and not to forget to send the fifty dollars to her sister.

That was why Mitch wasn't around when Prudence showed up.

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He took his money over to the Post Office and there, on account he liked to jaw a little, make friends, set up contacts—you never knew when you might need them—he got to gabbing with the postal clerk.

His name was Cornell and he was tired. Mitch figured the guy was born that way. Besides, there was something about a Post Office that dragged at you. No fun in it, nothing ever happened. All the stamps were the same (or looked the same) and all the clerks were the same (or looked the same) and if anything unusual came up, you checked it in the regulations and did what the rules said, exactly. And if the rules didn't tell you, then the thing couldn't be done, so you sent the customer away and went back to selling stamps.

Which people either wanted, or they didn't. There were no sales, no bargains. A damaged stamp was never marked down—it was worth what it said on its face, or nothing. There was nothing in between.

Still, the Post Office was a hell of a lot better than what Decker was doing over at the Homicide Squad, so Mitch handed in his fifty bucks for the money order and said, "It's not much dough, I guess. What's the most you ever handled?"

The clerk came alive. "Ten thousand dollars. Six years ago."

"The hell with six years ago. Say this week."

"Oh. That dame with seventeen hundred dollars. That was the biggest."

Click.

Mitch said cautiously, "You mean Prudence Gilford?"

"No. Patsy Grant."

"P.G.—same thing," Mitch said with certainty. "Same girl. And I'll bet she sent the dough to herself care of General Delivery, somewhere in California."

Cornell looked as if he thought Mitch were some kind of magician. "That's right," he said. "How did you know?"

"Me?" Mitch said, seeing that it all fitted like a glove. Prudence—or whatever her name was—had strangled Bella for the dough, then packed Bella's bag, dragged her out to the car, driven it to the woods, and left it there. And probably walked all the way back. That's why Prudence had been so tired.

"Me?" Mitch said again, riding on a cloud. "I know those things. That's what makes me a cop. Ideas—I got bushels of 'em." He thought of how the Lieutenant would go bug-eyed. Mitch Taylor, Homicide Expert.

He walked over to the phone booth, gave his shield number to the operator so he could make the call free and save himself a dime, and got through to the Homicide Squad.

Decker answered. "Taylor?" he said "Come on back. The Gilford dame just confessed."

"She—*what?*"

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"Yeah, yeah, confessed. While she was in here, the strap on her bag broke and she dropped it. Everything fell out—including a money order receipt for seventeen hundred dollars. We had her cold and she confessed. She knew all about Warhouse and planned it so we'd nail him."

There was a buzz on the wire and Lieutenant Decker's voice went fuzzy.

"Taylor," he said after a couple of seconds. "Can you hear me? Are you listening?"

"Sure," Mitch said. "But what for?"

And he hung up.

Yeah, Mitch Taylor, Homicide Expert.

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A MAN IS MISSING

by ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

SHERIFF BILL CATLIN spilled the contents of the envelope on his battered desk and glowered at the younger man across from him, who sat uncomfortably attentive.

"The trouble with these dudes," the Sheriff said, "is that they think out here in Idaho we ain't civilized. Now, here's Ed Harvel, the Chief of Police that was visiting out here three years ago. He wants me to locate an amnesia victim, and he writes me a two-page letter telling me how to go about it."

Hank Lucas nodded vaguely as the Sheriff's steely eyes looked up over the top of his spectacles.

"Now, this here chap," the Sheriff went on, "had a previous attack. He wandered off on his own. Was gone for three months, came back, and didn't know where he'd been. Never has been able to remember a thing about it. Didn't know what he'd done, what name he went under, where he lived, or anything about it. He just left his office five o'clock one afternoon and started for home. He showed up three months later. Ain't that a heck of a note?"

"That," Lucas agreed, "is a heck of a note."

"Now then," the Sheriff went on, "a year ago he did it again. Disappeared

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last September. But this time he writes his wife a picture post card. Sends it to her 'way back last October."

"Hey, wait a minute," Hank said. "If he sent his wife a picture post card, his mind hasn't gone plumb blank. How did he know where to address it?"

"I'm coming to that," the Sheriff said. "That's the funny thing. He'd been married three years, but he addressed the post card to his wife under her maiden name and sent it to the old address where she lived when he was courting her. Been married to her and still thinks she's his sweetie-pie."

Hank didn't say anything.

"Now, this here Ed Harvel," the Sheriff went on, "I guess he's a bang-up Chief of Police back East, but you put him out here and he's just a dude. Had him into the Middle Fork country three years ago, and there wasn't a single tenderfoot trick he didn't pull—even to getting lost. Now, when he writes to me, he tells me what he wants done, and then goes on and tells me how I should do it. You'd think I'd never done any investigating at all. Suggests this chap, whose name is Frank Adrian, is still going under his own name, because he signed the post card 'Frank.' Says it might be a good plan to check with the banks to see if he's opened an account, talk with the proprietors of some of the stores in town, go search the back country, and—"

"Ain't that all right?" Hank asked.

The Sheriff snorted. "It's the idea of him telling me how I should go about finding the guy! Anyhow, I don't think that's the best way to do it."

"No?" Hank asked.

"Nope," the Sheriff said positively, and then added, "Funny thing about dudes—"

"You said you wanted to see me official, Bill?" Hank interrupted, shifting his position uneasily.

"Now, don't get impatient," the Sheriff said. "A man would think you'd been shooting meat outta season and was afraid you'd left a back trail."

"You'd ought to know how it feels," Hank said. "I can remember before you was elected when—"

"Now this here amnesia guy," the Sheriff interrupted hastily but authoritatively, "seems to have gone over in the Middle Fork country and lived in a cabin. He had a camera, and someone took his picture standing in front of his cabin. It was sent to his wife—addressed to her, like I said, under her maiden name, Corliss Latham.

"The post card was mailed from Twin Falls, and darned if they didn't waste a lot of time corresponding with the folks down in Twin Falls. Then finally someone suggested it might be the Middle Fork country, and it seems like the man who is in charge of the missing person department found out Ed Harvel had been out here three years ago. So he goes to Ed and asks Ed for the name of the sheriff. And instead of writing a letter of introduction, Ed takes over and writes me the whole story and—"

"You wanted to ask me something about it?" Hank interrupted.

The Sheriff pushed the photographic post card across the desk. "Take a look."

Hank looked at the card. On the side reserved for the message was written: "Corliss, dear, this shows where I am living. It's the wildest, most inaccessible place you can imagine. I still

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feel the results of that auto accident six weeks ago, but what with climbing around these mountains, living on venison and trout, getting lots of fresh air and exercise, I'll be fit in no time at all."

The card was addressed to Miss Corliss Latham.

Hank turned the card over and studied the photograph of a mountain cabin, with a man standing in front of it smiling fatuously at the camera.

"Auto accident?" Hank asked.

"According to Ed Harvel, that accident was three years ago. The date on the card shows it was sent about six weeks after the guy disappeared the second time. Apparently he got his head banged in that accident, and whenever his memory slips a cog, it goes back to the time of that accident. Everything after that is a blank."

Hank studied the post card.

"What do you make out of it?" the Sheriff asked.

"A trapper's cabin," Hank said, "up on a ridge. It was built in the fall. You can see where the trees were chopped off around near the cabin—indicates there was about three feet of snow on the ground. The guy's sure a tenderfoot."

"He is, for a fact," the Sheriff agreed.

"Those high boots," Hank went on. "Hobnails in 'em too. Bet they weigh a ton. Look at that hunting knife hanging on his belt. Pretty far front. No protection on the sheath. He'd go hunting, jump over a log, double up when he lit, and the point of that knife would run through that leather sheath right into his leg and cut the big artery. Then we'd have another dead dude to pack out . . . What makes you think the cabin's around here?"

"Notice that little 'T.M.' up in the corner?"

Hank nodded.

"That's Tom Morton's initials. He puts 'em on the post cards he prints, with a string of figures after 'em. I don't know just what the idea is, myself. But I've seen those sets of figures on picture post cards Tom makes of the fishing country and places around town. Tom printed that post card, all right."

"You talk with Tom?" Hank asked.

"Nope, I was sorta waiting for you."

"Why me?"

"Well, now," the Sheriff said, "you see, it's like this, Hank. I want you to sorta help me out."

"Now, wait a minute," Hank said. "The way you're talking, Bill, you've gone and made some arrangements."

"Nothing out of the way," Sheriff Catlin said hastily. "I've got you a couple of customers. A couple of dudes."

"Who?" Hank asked.

"Seems like this Corliss Adrian has all of a sudden got in a helluva lather to get her husband located. Seems like there's another man been hanging around, and maybe she'd like to get a divorce. To do that she'd like to make a charge of desertion and serve papers. Or, in case she's a widow, then she could get married again right away. This here new man has got lots of money, and he's willing to spend it. He wants results quick. And the high-powered city detective who's been in charge of the investigation, a chap by the name of James Dewitt, has a vacation coming up. So he and this Corliss Adrian are driving out together, and they wanted—"

"Absolutely not," Hank said. "I can't—"

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"They'll pay regular dude prices," the Sheriff finished triumphantly.

"Well—" Hank hesitated. "That's different. How about the other guy, the one who wants to marry her? Is he coming?"

"Course not," the Sheriff said. "He's keeping under cover, hugging the ground like a spotted fawn and hoping no one sees him. He's the rich son of a big broker back there. Lots of dough and political influence—chap name of Gridley. His dad's a pal of Ed Harvel's, and that's partly why Ed's all worked up. You can see the thing from Gridley's viewpoint. S'pose they locate this husband and his mind's a blank, or maybe he's just checked out of marriage because he's tired of it. But he gets a lawyer and starts a suit for alienating affections or some such business. Nope, Gridley's son is sitting just as still as a pheasant in a grain patch."

Hank said, "Well, I've got my pack string where I *could* take a party into the Middle Fork. Of course, I don't know what sort this city detective is, and—"

"Let's you an' me go to see Tom Morton," the Sheriff suggested.

The Sheriff and Hank Lucas left the wooden courthouse and went out into the sun. The sprawling Idaho town was deceptive to those who didn't know it. A single long main street stretching in a thin ribbon of frame business structures, many of which were in need of paint, gave little indication of the innate prosperity of the place.

For a radius of more than fifty miles, cattlemen used the facilities of the town to service their ranches. Business from a county as big as some of the Eastern states flowed into the county seat. The bank, housed in a one-story frame structure, casually discussed financial deals which would have jarred many a more pretentious city bank to its granite foundations.

The Sheriff and Hank Lucas turned in at Tom Morton's doorway. The entrance room was bleak and cold, decorated with pictures of familiar faces, young men in uniform, girls at the time of high-school graduation. Here and there were hand-colored photographs of the mountainous back country.

Ignoring the sign, "Ring for Photographer," the Sheriff and Lucas clumped noisily along the uncarpeted corridor toward the living quarters and the darkroom in the rear.

"Hi, Tom," the Sheriff called.

"Hello," a voice answered from behind a door marked, "Darkroom."

"This is the Sheriff. Watcha doin'?"

"Just taking some films out of the developer. Stick around a minute, and I'll be with you."

Making themselves entirely at home with the assurance of people who live in neighborly harmony, the pair moved on into the living room, settled down in chairs by a potbellied stove which oozed forth welcome warmth, and waited for Tom Morton to emerge from the darkroom.

A few minutes later the photographer, tall, thin, wrapped in an aura of acid fixing bath which gave him the odor of a dill pickle, said, "What can I do for you boys?"

Bill Catlin showed him the photograph. "You make this post card, Tom?"

"Gosh, I don't know."

"Ain't these figures in pen and ink up in the corner yours?"

The photographer took the print,

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turned it over, and examined the figures in the upper right-hand corner. "That's right," he said.

"How come?" the Sheriff asked.

Morton grinned. "Well, if you guys have got to know something that's none of your business, I don't have a very big margin in this business. All photographic stuff has an expiration date put on it by the manufacturer. That's the limit during which the manufacturer will *guarantee* it's okay. But stuff will last for months or even years after that if it's had the right kind of care. And once the expiration date is past, you can pick it up cheap if you know where to go.

"Well, last year I had a chance to pick up three or four lots of post-card paper on which the expiration date had passed. I put figures on them so I'd know which lot was which, in case I had to discard one. Sometimes just before the paper begins to go bad, the prints get a little muddy. But I was lucky. I didn't have any trouble at all."

"So you're sure this was a print you made?"

"That's right."

"Try and think when you made it."

"Gosh, Bill, have a heart!"

"Take a good look at it," the Sheriff invited.

Morton studied the post card, while the Sheriff regarded him anxiously. Hank Lucas, having tilted himself back in his chair, put his boots up to the arm of another chair and perused an illustrated periodical.

Morton examined the figure on the post card, said, "Say, wait a minute. I'm kind of beginning to remember something about *that* picture."

"Atta boy," the Sheriff encouraged.

Morton said, "There was something funny about it . . . Yeah, I remember what it was now. The guy wanted just one print made."

"What's so funny about that?"

"Well, when people want a picture put on post cards, usually they want at least a dozen, to send to friends. This fellow came in and said he wanted one print made, and only one."

"You developed the film? Or do you remember?"

"No, I didn't. That was another thing. He brought the film with him, all developed. And he handed me this one post-card-size film and told me to make one print on a post card. He said he wanted to send it to his girl."

"Remember what he looked like?"

"He was the guy in the picture."

"Well, now, that's interesting. Probably along about last September?"

"I thought it was earlier. I thought it was some time in the summer."

"Couldn't have been in the summer," the Sheriff said. "Must have been in September."

Morton studied the pen-and-ink number on the upper right-hand corner of the post card, said, "I didn't think the stuff was still on hand in September. This was a batch I got around April. I thought it was gone by August. Guess I'm wrong, though."

"Well, we got the date on the post card and the time of the man's disappearance."

"He went off the beam. Had amnesia. His wife's looking for him. You wouldn't remember anything about him—the name he gave or anything of that sort?"

"Gosh, no. Along during the fishing season I get a lot of work from dudes, and I just keep the names long enough to deliver the pictures."

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"Well, Tom, just make a photo of this here post card and make us half a dozen prints right quick. Can you do that?"

Tom Morton looked at his watch. "How soon you want 'em?"

"Soon as I can get 'em."

"Don't know why I asked," Morton said, aggrieved. "You been making that same answer to that question ever since you been Sheriff."

As the two men went clump-clump-clumping out along the board corridor, Hank Lucas said to the Sheriff, "You know, Bill, if that fellow'd been in the Middle Fork country ever since last fall, I'd have known about it. He could have gone in for a month or two and holed up in a cabin somewhere; but—let me see that description again."

Catlin passed over the description from Ed Harvel's letter.

"Five feet nine," Hank said. "Age, thirty-two. Weight, a hundred and eighty-five pounds. Red hair. Blue eyes. Fair complexion. Freckles . . . Shucks, Bill, he hasn't been in the country very long. And if he went in, he didn't stay."

"I know," the Sheriff said soothingly, "but this here Ed Harvel, he thinks the only way to make a search is to go on into the Middle Fork and prowl up and down the country looking for this cabin."

"The cabin," Hank said, "can probably be located. It's up on a ridge, was built by someone who had a line of traps, was started in the fall before there was any snow on the ground, and finished after there'd been a storm that brought in about three feet of snow. You can tell where the stumps were cut close to the ground and then higher up. And those last saplings that stick out over the door to hang traps and stuff on were cut off five feet above the ground. The stumps are right near the cabin."

Bill Catlin grinned at him. "I wouldn't say anything like that to this detective that's coming out, Hank."

"Why not?"

"Well, now," the Sheriff said, "it's a funny think about city detectives. They think they're the only ones can do any of this here deductive reasoning. They don't realize that all that police work is just following a trail, and that a cowboy has to do more trail work in a day than a detective does in a month. This here Dewitt is goin' to pose as a sportsman, but he's going to be playing old eagle eye. And if you steal his thunder, it might not go so good."

Hank grinned. "Me? I'm just a rough, tough old cowpoke turned wrangler. How long's it been since this Gridley guy got to hangin' around?"

"Now, that," the Sheriff said, "is something Ed Harvel didn't tell me about. You ain't s'posed to know a thing about Gridley, Hank. And don't treat this dude like a detective. You're s'posed to know you're lookin' for a cabin and a guy that's missing, but this detective will probably be posin' as a dude friend of the family."

"That makes it easy."

The woman who left the noon stage and entered the hotel was slender-waisted, smooth-hipped, self-reliant. She seemed to have confidence in her ability to accomplish what she set out to do and to know exactly what it was she had in mind.

There was about her the stamp of the city. Obviously, she was in unfamiliar

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surroundings as she stood for a moment glancing up and down the street with its variegated assortment of frame buildings. Then she raised her eyes to look over the tops of the structures at the background of high mountains. At this elevation and in the dry air, the shadows, with their sharp lines of demarcation, seemed almost black as contrasted with the vivid glare of the sunlight. Rocky peaks stabbed upward into the deep blue of the sky, dazzling in their sunbathed brilliance.

Abruptly conscious of the fact that the stage driver was watching her curiously, she walked smoothly and unhesitatingly into the hotel, crossed the lobby to the desk, nodded to Ray Field, the proprietor, who had taken his place behind the counter to welcome incoming guests, and took the pen which he handed her.

For a brief moment she hesitated as the point of the pen was held over the registration card, and Ray Field, knowing from long experience the meaning of that momentary hesitation, cocked a quizzical eyebrow.

Then the woman wrote in a firm, clear handwriting, "Marion Chandler, Crystal City."

Ray Field became sociably communicative. "Lived there long?" he asked, indicating the place she had marked as her residence.

Ray Field kept that particular approach as an ace up his sleeve for women who registered under assumed names. Experience had taught him that there would be one of two responses. Either she would flush and become confused, or she would look at him with cold, haughty eyes and take refuge behind a mantle of dignity.

But this woman merely gave him a frank, disarming smile. Her steady hazel eyes showed no trace of embarrassment. She said, in a voice which was neither too rapid nor yet too hesitant, "Oh, I don't really live there. It just happens to be my legal residence." She went on calmly, "I'd like something with a bath, if you have it. I expect to be here only long enough to make arrangements to pack in to the Middle Fork country. Perhaps you know of some packer who is thoroughly reliable."

Field met those steady, friendly eyes and acknowledged defeat. "Well, now, ma'am, the best packer hereabouts is Hank Lucas. As a matter of fact, he's starting in to the Middle Fork country tomorrow, taking a party in—a man and a woman. Just a chance you *might* get to team up with them—that is, if it was agreeable all around. You could save a lot of expense that way. Of course, you'd want to be sure that you were going to get along all right together. You might speak to Hank."

She hesitated.

"The other two are due to arrive some time this afternoon," Field went on. "Man by the name of Dewitt and a woman named Adrian. If you want, I'll speak to Hank."

"I wish you would."

"He's in town and I—"

Field broke off as the door was pushed open, and Marion Chandler turned to survey the loose-jointed figure in tight-fitting levis and high-heeled boots that entered the lobby.

"This is Hank now," Field said in an undertone.

"Seen anything of my dudes?" Hank called out.

"They weren't on the stage. Guess they're coming by car," Field an-

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swered. "Come on over here, Hank."

Hank gave the young woman a swift, comprehensive glance, then swept off the sweat-stained sombrero to disclose dark curly hair, carelessly tumbled about his head. Field performed introductions and explained the reason for them.

"Well, now," Hank said, "it's all right with me, but you'd better sort of get acquainted with those other people this afternoon, see how you like them, and then sound them out. It's sort of embarrassing if you get out with people you don't like. You can get cabin fever awful easy."

"Cabin fever?" she asked, her voice and eyes showing amusement as she took in Hank's picturesque sincerity.

"That's right. We call it cabin fever hereabouts. Two people get snowed in a cabin all winter. Nothing to do but look at each other. Pretty quick they get completely fed up, then little things begin to irritate them, and first thing you know they're feuding. Outsiders get the same feeling sometimes when they're out on a camping trip with people they don't like."

"Oh, I'm quite sure I'd get along with these other people."

"Well, they'd ought to get along with you," Hank said, with open admiration. "What you going in for? Fishing? Or hunting? Or—?"

She gave him the same smile she had given Field when he had interrogated her about her residence. "I'm an amateur photographer. I want pictures of the Middle Fork country, and I'm particularly anxious to get pictures of people—people who have lived in that country for a long time. The old residents, you know. Types. Character studies."

"Well, I guess that could be arranged," Hank said, somewhat dubiously. "The country and the cabins are all right. The people, you'd have to approach tactfully."

She smiled. "You'd be surprised to find how tactful I am."

Hank grinned. "Well, those people are due in this afternoon. You can sort of size them up."

"What," she asked, "are *they* going in for? Hunting? Or fishing?"

Hank said, "Well, now, up in this country people just don't ask questions like that off-hand."

"You asked me."

Hank shifted his weight from one foot to the other. His eyes were pools of amusement. "Well, now, ma'am, you've just got to make allowances for me. I'm different."

"I'm quite good at making allowances for people," she said. "I've had lots of experience."

"That'll come in handy," Hank told her.

"And since you're the one who asks the questions," she went on, "suppose you find out from the other people whether it's all right for me to join the party."

"After you've had a chance to look 'em over and see if it's okay by you," Hank said.

"I am *quite* sure it will be all right as far as I'm concerned."

"You got a sleeping bag, ma'am?"

"Down at the express office—that is, it should be. I sent in most of my stuff by express a few days ago."

"I'll look it up," Ray Field said, and then asked casually, "Sent from Crystal City?"

She met his eyes. "No," she said. "Merely inquire for a package sent to

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Marion Chandler, care of the express office, if you will please."

Sometime early the next afternoon Marion Chandler looked back on the long line of horses from her position near the head of the string. The packs, covered with white tarpaulins and swaying slightly from side to side with the motion of the horses, made the pack string look like a huge centipede, each white pack a joint in the body.

The trail itself was hardly two feet wide in most places, a narrow ribbon cut out of the wall of the canyon. Below, a stream tumbled pell-mell over rocks and sunken logs, hurling itself around bends, lashing itself into spumes of white foam in its brawling haste.

High up above towered the walls of the canyon, granite pinnacles, in places seeming to overhang the trail. Farther back were more gradual slopes, splashed here and there with dark patches of pine, until, finally, far, far up were the serrated ridges of the highest peaks.

The trail wound interminably. Starting from a ranch located in a mountain "cove," it had followed a stream through timbered meadows where the cold lay in a still, hushed blanket of frosty white. Now the sun was high, and the trail had dropped sharply down the canyon. At these lower elevations the sun poured heat into the narrow defile.

Hank Lucas led the procession. Behind him was Corliss Adrian, whom Marion judged to be about twenty-seven. She had chestnut hair, brown eyes, and was wrapped in an aura of subdued tragedy. It was a pose which well suited her, a pose which Marion felt would make men refer to her as "brave."

Marion, watching her ride, knew that she was a tenderfoot. Her back was too stiff. She insisted on having her stirrups too short, the effect being to throw her weight far back in the saddle. Twice lately she had asked casually of Hank Lucas, "I wonder how far we've gone since we started." And Marion knew from the vague but cheerful manner in which Lucas answered the question that this was a routine with him, the first indication that a "dude" was becoming fatigued. But Corliss was being brave and uncomplaining, riding in silence.

Back of Marion Chandler, James A. Dewitt, a thick, jolly individua in the middle thirties, frankly hung to the horn of the Western saddle when he came to the bad places in the trail. Behind him rode Sam Eaton, who was doing the cooking for the party, a quiet, middle-aged man who said nothing except when absolutely necessary.

Back of him the pack horses came swaying along, and bringing up the rear was Howard Kenney, the assistant wrangler, a young man who had recently been discharged from the Army and whose eyes contained a touch of sadness. Marion had noticed that when he became jovial he seemed to make a conscious attempt at wrenching his mind away from past memories, an attempt which would almost invariably be followed by a period of detachment during which his tired gray eyes would focus on the distance.

Now he was riding along, accepting the cloud of dust kicked up by the pack train as part of the day's work, from time to time swinging over in the saddle to scoop up a rock of convenient throwing size from the side of the mountain. Then he would stand in his

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stirrups and chuck the rock with unerring accuracy to prod along whatever pack horse at the moment seemed to be inclined to hold back.

Hank Lucas, at the head of the procession, rode with long stirrups and a loose back. His sweat-stained sombrero was far back on his head, and he kept up a steady succession of cowboy songs. At times he would raise his voice so that those behind him could hear the rollicking words of a fast-moving verse or two, then suddenly he would invoke a veil of self-imposed censorship which left the words mere garbled sounds.

At midafternoon the long string of horses wound its way down the canyon and debouched on the Middle Fork of the Salmon River.

The trail followed the river for a couple of miles, then wound around a rocky point where the way had been blasted out of sheer granite, and here the trail was barely wide enough to give a horse footing. On the left there was a drop of some two hundred feet, and so narrow was the way that the overhang of the saddle and the bulge of the horse's side completely obscured the edge of the trail. Sitting erect in the saddle and looking down, one saw only two hundred feet of empty space under the left stirrup, with glinting water far below.

Dewitt, grabbing his saddle horn and staring with fear-widened eyes at the trail, still managed to preserve a semblance of his joviality. "I say up there, Hank," he yelled.

Hank swung loosely in the saddle, looking back inquiringly over his left shoulder, pivoting in such a way that he didn't disturb his balance in the least. His face showed only courteous and casual interest.

"What would you do if you met another pack coming from the opposite direction in a place like this?" Dewitt asked apprehensively.

"Well," Hank drawled, after an interval, "you couldn't turn around, and you couldn't pass. Reckon the only thing to do would be to decide which outfit was the least valuable and shoot it."

"Please don't joke about it," Corliss Adrian said in a low, throaty voice.

Hank's grin was infectious. "Ma'am," he said. "I'm not joking. That was *my* answer. S'pose *you* try and figure out some other way."

He included them in a lazy grin, said, "Only about ten minutes to camp," and swung back around in the saddle. Almost immediately his voice rose in a plaintive melody . . .

His ten minutes turned out to be exactly twenty-three minutes, as Marion Chandler noted from her wrist watch. Then they made camp in a grassy meadow, with pines furnishing a welcome shade. The packs came off in record time. The cook had a fire going, and even before the wranglers had finished hobbling the horses and putting a cowbell on the leader, Marion could smell the aroma of cooking.

James Dewitt came over to stand by her. "You seem to have stood the trip quite well."

"It wasn't bad."

"You do quite a bit of riding."

"What makes you think that?"

"I don't know—the way you were sitting on the horse. You seemed to be a part of him. You aren't tired?"

"Not particularly."

"I'm all in," he confessed. "Too much weight to pack around. I'm going to get busy and take off twenty

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or twenty-five pounds. Been threatening to do it for a year. Perhaps this will be a good chance to start."

Marion nodded toward the campfire. "Wait until that gets down to coals and you begin to smell the broiling steaks.

"Steaks?"

"That's what Sammy told me. Steaks the first night out."

Dewitt made an exaggerated motion of wiping the back of his hand across his lips. "Guess I'll start my diet tomorrow," he said. "So you're taking pictures?"

"That's right."

"Have a contract with some magazine?"

"No, I'm free-lancing."

"Rather an expensive trip just for free-lancing, isn't it?"

"I don't think so," she said coolly.

"Pardon me," he grinned. "I'm always sticking my neck out, saying things that happen to crop into my mind. Did you get any pictures along the trail?"

"No, I'm going to wait a day or two before I do much photography. It's always better to play it that way. The scenery's better, and the first day's journey is usually the longest and the hardest on the stock and the people. Packers don't like to have you hold up the string the first day out."

"You sound like a veteran."

She laughed gaily and said, "I've been listening to Hank."

"But you have been on quite a few camping trips?"

"Oh, yes."

It was plain that Dewitt wanted to ask more questions, but her manner held his curiosity in check.

Corliss Adrian came over to join them. "Wasn't it perfectly delightful?" she asked, but her voice was flat with fatigue.

Hank Lucas, having finished hobbling the horses, pulled a can of fruit juice from one of the kyacks, jabbed a hunting knife through the top of the can, produced paper cups and a bottle. He mixed the ingredients with haste.

"Now, this here," he announced, "is a little mountain tonic. A couple of these has the effect of loosening the sore muscles, removing kinks from the back, and whetting the appetite. How about it, Mr. Dewitt? Want me to get out your fishing tackle so you can catch a few trout before supper?"

Dewitt grabbed the cocktail. "Gosh, no," he said. "All I want is to sprawl out and rest. Where are the sleeping bags?"

Lucas passed the drinks around, tossed off one himself, said, "Coming right up." And he promptly proceeded to busy himself getting things unpacked.

Marion was grateful for the fatigue that permeated the camp, which she knew had interposed a shield between her and what had apparently been a well-planned course of questioning agreed on in advance. Dewitt had done his part, but Corliss had been too tired to do hers.

As the sun declined in the west, the shadows of the mountains on the other side of the stream marched rapidly toward them. Almost instantly it became cool and by the time the broiled steaks, potatoes, and salad were on their plates, the sharp tang of the mountain air, plus the effect of the cocktails, had whetted their appetites so that eating was a full-time occupation And in an incredibly short time

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after eating the food induced a drowsy torpor which made even the most fragmentary conversation an effort.

The fire crackled cheerfully for a while, then died down, and the circle of darkness which had been waiting just outside the camp moved silently in.

"I'm going to roll in," Marion announced. "Good night, everyone."

James Dewitt sighed, and said, "Good night." He rose and started for his sleeping bag. His first two steps were staggering, off-balance attempts to keep himself erect as his cramped muscles for the moment refused to work.

A moment later Corliss Adrian had rolled in, and Marion, hurriedly disrobing, slid down into her sleeping bag. She looked over at the campfire, where Hank Lucas, Sam Eaton, and Howard Kenney were gathered in a little group silhouetted against the glowing embers.

She wondered sleepily at the subject of their conference and determined that she would lie awake to watch them, suddenly suspicious of the intense attitude of concentration.

She doubled the light pillow of her sleeping bag to prop her head up so she could see them more clearly, closed her eyes momentarily when they began to smart, to shut out the light of the campfire. Her consciousness was almost instantly sucked down into an abyss of warm comfort . . .

When she wakened there was the feel of dawn in the air. The stars over the tops of the big pines had receded into a sky which was taking on just a faint suggestion of greenish-blue color.

She knew that it was cold outside because she could feel a tingling at the tip of her nose, but the envelope of the sleeping bag was filled with warm down and she was too comfortable to even move. She lay there in a state halfway between sleeping and waking, listening to the sounds of the purling river and the stir of activity around camp. Time ceased to exist.

There was color in the pine trees now. The stars had disappeared and the sky had taken on a distinctly bluish tint. She heard the sound of distant shouts, and then the clanging of the bell on the lead horse became suddenly a hysterical clamor.

Hoofs pounded and, startled, she raised herself on an elbow, to see the horses coming into camp, driven along by Howard Kenney, who was riding bareback, letting out cowboy yells at intervals. Sleep was effectively banished.

Marion struggled into her clothes, splashed ice-cold water on her face, and felt that surge of vitality which comes with the dawn when one has been sleeping on the ground in the open.

With an appetite sharpened by the fresh air, she watched the cook bring flapjacks to a golden brown and put them on her plate together with slices of crisp, meaty bacon. A thick slab of country butter melted to run down the sides of the hot cakes and mingle with the maple syrup. There was clear, strong coffee in a huge agateware cup.

She ate with zest, and then walked down to the edge of the river, where Dewitt was just finishing putting his trout rod together. He had made a few preliminary casts to soften up his leader, and now, with a skilled wrist motion, sent a fly winging out in a long cast.

"Hello," he said, grinning amiably. "You're looking mighty fit this morn-

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ing." Using his left hand to pull the line through the guides, he brought the fly around the edge of a little ripple, then across a straight stretch of swift current.

"Feeling like a million dollars," she said.

A trout suddenly flashed up out of the water, struck at the fly, missed, and then went sulking down to the depths of the stream.

"Missed him," Dewitt said. "I was a little too anxious. Whipped the fly right out of his mouth."

Hank Lucas, who had joined them without being observed, said, in his peculiar drawling voice, "No need to get discouraged. There's lots of 'em in here. If you want to fish an hour or so while we're getting the packs on, you'll have more fish than you can carry . . . Haven't seen Mrs. Adrian, have you?"

Dewitt snapped in the line, made another cast. "No. Is she up?" he asked, his eyes glued to the fly.

"She's up, all right. Took a little walk upstream. She hasn't come back for breakfast."

Dewitt said abruptly, "Huh? You say she's gone?"

"That's right. Seems to have taken a walk," Lucas said, "but there aren't any tracks on the trail. I thought I'd take a look along the stream here, and then I saw you fishing."

Lucas strolled more or less aimlessly up the stream edge between the rocks, then said suddenly, "Here's where she went."

Marion had to look twice to see the track. Then it appeared to be only a faint discoloration of the ground. But, some twenty yards farther on, Lucas, who had kept moving on ahead, uncovered another fresh track—this time, made in damp sand and distinctly visible.

Dewitt abruptly lost interest in the fishing and snapped in his line. "Guess I'd better follow her."

"Keep on fishing if you want," Hank said. "I'll go on up . . . Maybe you'd like to take a walk," he said to Marion, and then added, with a grin, "In case she's taking a swim, you can go on ahead and tell her she'll have to hurry if she wants breakfast. We've got to get the packs on."

Dewitt hesitated. "Really, I should come," he said.

"Why?" Hank asked, and then added, "I can probably follow her trail as well as you can."

Dewitt grinned. "Oh, well, if you put it that way," he said.

He resumed his fishing, and Hank and Marion moved slowly upstream.

Almost instantly the lazy smile left Hank's eyes. His manner became tense and businesslike. "Any idea where she might have gone?" he asked.

"No. I woke up shortly before dawn and then dozed again. I didn't hear her move."

"She was in her sleeping bag when Kenney and I took out after the horses. You haven't any idea what she might be after?"

"She might have wanted to bathe."

"Water's pretty cold," Hank said, and then added abruptly, "You know what she's in here for?"

"She wants to find her husband?" Marion ventured.

"That's right . . . You're a photographer?"

"Yes."

Hank said, "Here's a copy of a picture. It ain't too clear because it isn't a print—it's a picture of a picture.

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What do you make of it?" He handed her one of the post card reproductions Tom Morton had made.

"What," Marion asked, studying the photograph, "do you want to know about it?"

"Anything you can tell about the picture. Just from looking at it."

"Lots of things," Marion said.

"What, for instance?"

"To begin with," she said, "the picture was probably taken with a 3-A folding Kodak with a rapid rectilinear lens. It was taken in the middle of the day."

"How do you figure that?"

"Well," she said, "despite the fact that the lens was stopped 'way down, there's still a certain blurring at the extreme corners and there's a peculiar diffused warmth to the shadows. You get that with a rapid rectilinear lens. The anastigmatic lens has a tendency to cut things wire-sharp. But there isn't quite the warmth in the shadows and—"

"Wait a minute. What do you mean the lens was stopped "way down?" Hank asked.

She said, "When the diaphragm shutter of a lens is wide open, the speed is increased but there's very little depth to the field. In other words, if you take a fairly long focal-length lens such as is necessary to cover a post-card-size film, and set it, say, at twenty-five feet and leave it wide open, things beyond thirty feet or so will be out of focus, and things closer than twenty feet will also be out of focus. I've forgotten the exact table, but that will serve as an illustration. On the other hand, if the lens is stopped 'way down, virtually everything will be in focus. The stopping down gives a depth of field. Objects only eight or ten feet away will be fairly sharp, and so will things in the distance."

"And this lens was stopped down?"

"Yes," Marion said. "Moreover, see the little white fog down there in the corner? Well, that's a light leak, and probably came from a little hole in the bellows of the camera. If it had been careless winding on the spool, you'd have seen a little different type of leak and . . . Here's Mrs. Adrian now."

Corliss Adrian, trim and fresh, stepped out from behind a rock. Apparently she was engaged in watching the other side of the stream very intently. But she seemed to watch it a little too long, and her surprise on finally seeing Hank and Marion seemed a little too pronounced.

Marion started to say, "I think she's been watching us," but then abruptly changed her mind and remained silent.

Hank said good-naturedly, but still with a certain rebuke in his voice, "This here is a searching party out to locate the lost tenderfoot."

"Don't ever worry about me," Corliss Adrian said, with a quick, nervous laugh. "I decided to get up and see if I couldn't see a deer."

"See anything?"

"I saw some does and fawns and one young buck."

"Breakfast is just about over," Hank said. "We're trying to get things cleaned up so we can get away."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'll rush right on back. Hank—"

"Yes?"

"Do you see that canyon up there, the one—with the peculiarly shaped rock up near the top of the ridge?"

"Uh-huh."

"What place is that?"

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"Broken Leg Canyon."

"I wonder if we could go up there. It looks like marvelous country."

"That's just about where I'm aiming to go," Hank said.

"Oh, that's wonderful."

"You see," Hank explained, "when Bill showed me the picture of that cabin, there wasn't anything on it that gave a definite clue to where it was but somehow, from the way the ground looked, I had a hunch the thing might be up Broken Leg Canyon. I thought we'd take a look up there. Provided it's okay with Miss Chandler, here."

"Oh, I think that would be wonderful," Marion said eagerly. "That rock would really make a magnificent photograph."

"Then that's all settled," Corliss said.

Marion wondered if Hank Lucas had detected a certain note of smug satisfaction in Corliss' voice. She glanced at him from the corner of her eyes, but he seemed thoroughly engrossed in picking his way over stream-worn boulders.

Dewitt was landing a fish as they walked past, and was too engrossed in what he was doing to even see them. The cook was plainly angry, and Howard Kenney, faced with the job of getting the pack saddles on the horses, was indignantly silent.

Corliss Adrian moved over to a place by the fire, apparently heedless of the taciturn disapproval of the cook. Lucas started getting pack saddles on the horses, and Marion moved over to the two men. "Is there anything I can do?" she asked Kenney.

"Not a thing," Kenney said, smiling. "You might get your personal things all together and the air out of your mattress. No use trying to break any records getting a start, though. The Queen of Sheba is going to take her time."

Marion glanced over to where Corliss Adrian was settling herself in a folding chair at the camp table, with every evidence of preparing to enjoy a leisurely breakfast.

"Not much we can do until we get the kitchen ready to load," Kenney explained. "Perhaps I'd better help you get the air out of your mattress." He walked over to the beds, unloosened the valves, and slowly rolled up the sleeping bags, letting the air escape.

"You like this life, don't you?" Marion asked.

"Love it."

"But it's hard work, isn't it?"

"Oh, off and on. But it's nice work. It's the only way I can afford to hang around the country as much as I'd like to. Sort of vacation."

"I see."

"Sleep all right last night?" he asked.

"Fine."

"You would. You were taking the ride all right yesterday. You're used to Western saddle trail riding."

She became conscious of the curious interrogation in his eyes, and knew suddenly that this was no casual questioning, but a well-planned examination which probably linked in with the three-way conference at the campfire last night.

"Yes, I've done some mountain riding," she said, and calmly turned away and began packing her personal belongings.

Thereafter Marion avoided Howard Kenney . . .

When camp had been broken and all but the last two horses loaded, Hank Lucas approached his dudes.

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"Kenney can finish throwing the packs, with the help of the cook, and bring the string along," Lucas said. "I want to move on ahead and pick out a good campsite. If you folks would like to come along with me, you can save a little time."

"That'll be fine," Marion said.

"Wait a minute," Dewitt interposed cautiously. "How do you propose to save this extra time? As I see it, the pack train will be ready to start in ten or fifteen minutes."

"There's quite a bit of smooth trail ahead," Hank said. "We can put the horses in a trot."

"In a trot!" Corliss Adrian exclaimed in dismay.

Hank grinned. "Don't appeal to you, eh?"

"If it makes any difference to the others I'll be only too glad to go along," Corliss said with dignity, "but if it doesn't I think I'd prefer to walk my horse. However, you're in charge, and I'll do as you say."

Dewitt stepped into the situation. "You two go right ahead," he said. "Take all the time you want. We'll come along with the pack string. After all, we've got all day. Our time isn't *that* valuable."

Lucas glanced at Marion.

She nodded.

"Okay, let's go," Lucas said. He took his chaps off the horn of the saddle, buckled them around his waist, fastened the snaps under his legs, put on his spurs, and swung into the saddle.

They started out at a brisk trot. There was a wide valley to skirt where another stream came into the Middle Fork. It took a detour of nearly three miles to bring them back opposite the mouth of the canyon on the other side of the stream. The horses splashed through a ford, followed relatively level going for three-quarters of a mile, and then started an abrupt climb.

Marion regarded the sweating horses during one of the brief rest periods which enabled the animals to catch a few quick breaths.

"Aren't you pushing the horses a bit fast?" she asked.

Hank tilted back his sweat-stained sombrero. "To tell you the truth, I wasn't anxious to have those other two along. I don't want to disappoint them, in case I don't find what I'm looking for."

"What are you looking for?"

"The cabin shown in that photograph."

"You think you know where it is?"

"Well, now," Hank said, shifting sideways in the saddle and cocking his right knee over the horn of the saddle, "I can best answer that by saying that I know the places where it ain't."

She laughed.

"You see," Hank went on seriously, "that cabin is up on a ridge somewhere. I know just about when it must have been built. That is, I know it was built *after* the last real heavy winter—on account of the down timber. I know the general nature of the country it's in. And, well, I've been doing a little listening around.

"A year ago a chap who *could* be this man they're looking for showed up here and had a partner with him. They went up in this country somewhere and sort of disappeared. Everyone thinks they went out the other way through the White Cliff country. Had one pack horse between them. I talked with the chap who sold 'em the horse. One of the fellows was a pretty good

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outdoor man; the other was a rank tenderfoot. Now, maybe there's a cabin up in here somewhere that was built and then abandoned."

"Do you know where it is?"

Hank shook his head.

Marion surveyed the tumbled waste of wild, rugged country. "How in the world do you ever expect to find it in this wilderness if you don't know where it is?"

"Same way the people who lived in it found it," Hank said. "Take along in the winter when trails were pretty well snowed over, they had to have something to guide them when they wanted to go home."

"How do you mean?"

Hank motioned toward the trees along the trail. "See those marks?"

"Oh, you mean the blazes?"

"That's right. Now, you see, along this trail you've got a long blaze and underneath it two short ones. They're pretty well grown over and a person that didn't know what he was looking for wouldn't find them. But they show up plain enough to a woodsman."

"And you think these men blazed a trail in to their cabin?"

"Must have."

"How much farther?"

Hank grinned "I'm darned if I know. I'm just looking for blazes."

He swung around in the saddle, dropped his right foot back in the stirrup. "Okay," he said, "let's go."

From little natural meadows which existed here and there along the trail, Marion could see out over an awe-inspiring expanse of country—mile on mile of tumbled mountain peaks, deep, shadow-filled canyons, high, jagged, snow-covered crests.

Hank Lucas looked back at her and grinned. "Lots of it, ain't there?"

"I'll say there is."

Abruptly he reined in his horse. "What is it?"

"There's an elk," he said.

"Where? *I* don't see him."

"Over there. Wait a minute; he's going to bugle to the horses."

From the shadows came a clear, flutelike whistle which started on a low note, ran to a higher note, then dropped through two lower notes into final silence.

"Oh, how *beautiful!*" Marion exclaimed.

"First time you ever heard an elk bugle?"

Her eyes were glistening. She nodded her head.

"He doesn't like the horses," Lucas said. "Thinks they're a couple of bull elks which may be rivals. This country is pretty wild. He don't know much about men. There he is over there in the shadows under that tree."

She caught sight of him then, a huge, antlered animal standing in the shadows. Abruptly he pawed the ground, lowered his head, gave a series of short, sharp, barking challenges.

"He looks as though he's getting ready to attack," Marion said, alarmed.

"He is," Hank grinned. "But he'll get our scent before he does any damage, find out we ain't other elks, and beat it." He turned to her sharply. "I don't notice you trying to photograph him. I haven't seen you photograph anything so far. If you didn't come in here to take pictures why *did* you come in here?"

She said, "If I told you, would you keep it to yourself?"

"I might."

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Marion's speech was quick and nervous. "I came in here to find my brother. I think he's the one who was with Frank Adrian. That's why I was willing to go along with these other two."

Hank spun his horse so he was facing her. "Okay," he said quietly; "suppose you tell me about him."

"I don't know too much about it," she said. "The last letter I had from Harry was last summer. He was at Twin Falls then. There was an ad in the paper stating that a man who was going into the hills for his health wanted a partner who was fully familiar with camping, trapping, and mining. This man was willing to give a guarantee, in addition to a half interest in any mines or pelts. It sounded good. Harry wrote me he'd answered the ad and got the job, that he liked his partner a lot, and they were going to head into the Middle Fork country. That's the last I heard from him."

"He write you often?"

"Only once every two or three months," she said. "But he's close to me. He's my older brother."

"He give you any address?" Hank asked.

"Yes, the county seat back there."

"You write to him there?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"The letters came back. I don't think Harry would have gone away and —well, he wouldn't have gone this long without writing unless something had happened. I've been wondering whether that ad was on the up and up."

"I see," Hank said. "Your brother's name Harry Chandler?"

"Harry Benton," she said. "My name is Marion Chandler Benton. I didn't want to use the last name until I knew more about things. I thought perhaps if Harry had got in any trouble I might be able to help him. He's impulsive and a little wild."

Hank regarded her shrewdly. "Ever been in trouble before?"

"Yes, You see, he's—well, he's impulsive."

"And what's the reason you didn't tell Corliss Adrian about this?"

"Because if he's got into trouble," Marion said, "I can do more for him if people don't know who I am. I'm telling you because you know that I'm in here for something other than photographs, and I want you to know what it is so—well, so you'll know."

"So I'll quit trying to find out?" Hank asked, with a grin.

"Something like that."

"This brother of yours is sort of the black sheep of the family?"

"Yes."

"But he's your favorite, just the same?"

"Yes."

"Want to tell me about the other time he was in trouble?"

"No."

Hank gently touched the tip of his spur to his horse. "Okay, let's go."

They rode on for another half mile, passing now through big-game country. Twice they saw deer standing watching them. Once they heard crashes in the forest as a big bull elk stampeded his cows out of their way, then turned, himself, to bugle a challenge.

"Usually the deer don't hang around so much in the elk country," Hank said "but there seem to be a lot of them in here. I—What's this?" He stopped abruptly.

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"I don't see anything."

Hank pointed to a tree.

"Oh, yes; I see it now. It's a blaze—a different blaze from this trail blaze. Looks as though the person who made it didn't want it to be too prominent."

Hank indicated other trees bearing all but imperceptible scars. "Want to take a look?" he asked.

She nodded.

Hank turned his horse down the ridge, following the faint trail.

"Shouldn't you leave a note or something, in case the pack string catches up with us?"

"They'll see our tracks," Hank said.

They skirted wide patches of down timber, lost the trail twice on such detours but eventually picked it up again. Then, without warning, they came to a little clearing and a cabin.

Hank swung down off his horse and dropped the reins to the ground.

Marion looked at the cabin for a moment, then flung herself out of the saddle. "It's the same cabin that's in the picture," she said. "The picture was taken from over there."

They crossed the little opening and Hank pushed the cabin door open.

Marion stood at his side, looking over the one-room structure.

There was a wood tove of rough iron, two bunks, a table, a rude bench a row of boxes which had been nailed to the wall so as to form a cupboard and in which were a few dishes, knives, and forks. A frying pan hung from a nail, and there was a large stewpan face down on the stove.

The cabin had a dirt floor, but it was cleaner than any abandoned cabin Marion had ever seen. Yet it held that characteristic musty smell which indicated it had been some time since there had been a fire in the stove or since men had slept on the two bunks.

On the table was a kerosene lamp partially filled with kerosene.

"Well," Hank said, "I guess this is it. You say your brother's an old-time camper?"

"That's right. He's done quite a good deal of trapping and prospecting. He didn't like too much civilization."

Hank nodded. He took off his hat and scratched the hair around his temples.

"What is it?" she asked. "Anything?"

"No," Hank said, "I guess it's okay. Let's get back to the trail. We'll want to camp right around here somewhere."

"We could camp in the flat here and use the cabin, couldn't we?"

"Better not," Hank said shortly. "Let's go back to the trail and—Hello, what's this?"

Hank was looking at the three boxes which had been nailed to the side of the cabin.

"What is it? I don't see anything."

Hank said, "That piece of paper. Looks like the edge of an envelope."

"Oh, yes, I see it now."

Hank moved over. His thumb and forefinger gripped the corner of an envelope which had been pushed into a small space between the boxes and the log wall of the cabin.

Marion laughed nervously. "It must be a letter he put there and forgot to mail."

Hank turned the envelope over, said, "It's addressed, '*To Whoever Finds This Letter.*' The envelope isn't sealed. Let's just take a look."

(*Continued on page 150*)

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a new story by

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**ARTHUR PORGES**
TITLE:	***The Unsolvable Crime***
TYPE:	Theft and Detection
LOCALE:	United States
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*When Captain Corbett retired, his record was almost perfect—only one unsolved mystery. But that one failure nagged and nagged at him until . . .*

ONE YEAR AFTER CAPTAIN CORbett retired, he received a letter that puzzled and intrigued him. For perhaps thirty seconds he thought it might be a trap—set by some vengeful ex-con who was out to get him. But the message sounded too sincere to have come from an embittered criminal. Corbett read it again, frowning.

Dear Captain Corbett:

I happened to read a story about you in a magazine, and was particularly interested in your references to the Stapledon Isotope Case of twelve years ago. There was something rather wistful in your account of that only unsolved case in your career.

The fact is, I have some vital information about the case which would certainly be of value to you—at least, psychologically, if not in any legal sense.

If you would care to join me for dinner at seven on Friday, I will be happy to tell you what I know about the crime.

Sincerely yours,

Max Frankau

For the life of him, Corbett could not recall any Max Frankau. His memory, like that of any competent police officer, had to be excellent, yet the name meant nothing to him. But since he was now desperately bored by retirement, and anxious to have any light

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shed on the puzzling matter of Stapledon Isotopes, he eagerly accepted the invitation.

Max Frankau proved to be a dark, sardonic little man in his early forties. His face was no more familiar to Corbett than his name.

All during dinner, the excellence of which was lost on the retired detective, Corbett kept darting furtive glances at his host's face; but there was no corresponding response in his brain. To make matters more exasperating, Frankau politely but adamantly avoided any discussion of the unsolved case.

Finally, when coffee was served, and his host had given Corbett a superior cigar of the long dark kind not even a Captain of Detectives can afford very often, Frankau sat back in his chair, blew a huge cloud of fragrant smoke, and said, "There are just two conditions I must impose if I am to clear up the Stapledon case."

Corbett was somewhat taken aback. He had not expected more than a few minor facts, at best; but his host spoke of breaking the entire puzzle.

"First," Frankau continued, before the detective could reply, "I would like complete details of your own investigation at the time. And second, I want your word not to repeat to anybody what I am going to tell you."

Corbett blinked.

"A crime was committed," the ex-detective said slowly. "A big one —merchandise worth over two hundred thousand dollars vanished."

"Technically it was a crime," Frankau admitted calmly. "But there were extenuating circumstances, as I think you will agree when you know the facts. Besides," he said with a smile, "we both are aware that the statute of limitations now makes prosecution, after twelve years, impossible. And at best it would be only your word against mine."

Corbett was, above all, a realist. "I don't seem to have much choice," he said a little wryly. "Okay, you have a deal. If I don't find out the truth—after what you've already said—I'll never sleep again. You have no idea how that case has nagged at me all those years. The only one I ever bungled. Not," he added hastily, "that anybody else did better on it."

"You'll see why very soon," Frankau said, his dark eyes twinkling with a kind of cheerful malice that Corbett did not find offensive. "Now suppose you tell me your side of the case first."

"Suits me. It will be a relief to go over the damned thing again with somebody other than the little observer in my own thick head." He took two puffs on the cigar, and then said, "Well, to begin with, Stapledon Isotopes was making a special powdered form of platinum —an isotope of the ordinary metal. It was fabulously valuable as a catalyst—that is, it helped other

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chemical reactions. It was a breakthrough in smog eliminators, in the manufacture of sulfuric acid—oh, in a thousand things. I'm not a scientist," he added hastily, "but I had to learn a little. Want to know what an isotope is?"

"Never mind," Frankau said, his lips twitching. "I'm well up on such things."

"Frankau, my God!" Corbett cried. "Of course! You were called 'Franklin' on the company books—that's why I didn't place you."

"Right—I knew you'd spot me sooner or later. Stapledon didn't like 'foreign' names, so they urged me to use 'Franklin.' "

"You were one of the technicians there—they had about fifty, as I recall."

"And you checked me out, of course."

"Well . . . yes. But not in too great detail—not with fifty of you all alike in your routines. It was more a matter of the security procedures, the precautions that Stapledon used. But you must know all that, so why ask me?"

"I don't know the details—most of the investigation was kept confidential between the police and the big-shots. You didn't want the thief to guess your methods, I suppose. So please go on as if I hadn't been there."

Corbett gave him a sharp glance, then shrugged.

"All right, you're calling the cards. A few weeks after production started, they began to miss powder. The stuff was worth fifty thousand dollars an ounce in this country, and might've brought almost twice as much in the Communist countries. Naturally, the stuff was well guarded. But they couldn't really mass-produce the isotope; don't ask me why. Each technician had to use practically an individual laboratory approach—the way the discoverers had. Stapledon told me it was a joint research project that first developed the powder.

"Anyhow, we checked every possible way the powder might have been got out. All the technicians changed clothes coming in to the plant, also before leaving. They brought nothing in, and they took nothing out. They were even inspected physically—by doctors; you know what I mean. Even x-rays of their stomachs; the dense metal would show up clearly if anybody swallowed some.

"The men ate in a cafeteria; no one was permitted to bring in his own food. They had to serve diabetic lunches for some of the staff—supply pills or insulin, too. So nothing came in—absolutely nothing.

"The windows were screened, but if anybody dropped anything through, it would still fall inside the fence, and there were enough guards to keep the thief from recovering whatever had been got out that way.

"We checked every man who

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handled the stuff; they were all clean. Nobody was spending a lot—we especially watched everyone with a big mortgage or other debts. Finally, after three ounces had disappeared over six weeks, the thefts stopped. And that's where the case stayed. It was never solved."

"Then it's time someone solved it," Frankau said, smiling. "You're looking at the thief."

"I suspected as much," Corbett said drily. "Now it's your turn."

"In the first place," Frankau said, "Stapledon lied to you. The isotope was not a committee job. I did it alone, and he cheated me. Instead of ending up with millions, I got a promotion, along with advice to change my name. Oh, it was a smooth bit of piracy—I couldn't prove a thing in court. But I stayed there only to get my own back. I meant to take them for two hundred thousand, at least, and then leave. I didn't know how difficult it would be, but I'm a research man, and felt sure I could outwit their security force if I put my mind to it.

"Then, when they instituted all those safeguards, I began to have doubts; the place was locked up tight." He looked at Corbett, his eyes twinkling, and added, "And then I found some priceless helpers."

"So it wasn't a one-man job," Corbett said, almost with satisfaction. "I often wondered. The guards seemed incorruptible, and they watched each other; besides, they were being rotated all the time—"

"It was a one-man job, all right, but I had several thousand accomplices—and they didn't care about sharing any of the loot." He saw Corbett blink, and laughed.

"As you said, we took our lunch in the cafeteria. But we could also buy snacks there, or bring a package lunch up to the lab if we liked.

"It was a simple matter for me to have my favorite dessert. Oddly enough, I seldom ate much of it. Instead, I added a few grams of the isotope, and put the dessert out on the window ledge—inside the screen, of course. One quick move, as if I were adjusting the window, and it was done."

He gave Corbett a quizzical stare.

"Do you know the subject of my Master's thesis?"

The detective shook his head.

"Well, it was on bees."

"Bees?" Corbett's eyes were cloudy with bewilderment.

"Twelve years ago I had one of the few hives in that rather commercial area—and I lived quite near the plant. There were not many flowers those last weeks in September, so the bees had to forage very hard. It didn't take them long to find my spiked honey. They gorged themselves, notified the other girls at the hive, and soon started a typical assembly line. Naturally, they were not bothered by the screen, fence, or guards!"

Corbett gulped.

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"You're telling me—?"

"Exactly. My five thousand accomplices. They brought almost every milligram back to the larvae. All I had to do was 'pan' the refuse heap and the stored honey to recover the powder. It's easy to separate such a heavy dust—it was really a dust, you know. With a powder, my scheme might not have worked; bees won't swallow just anything—they're fussy."

"One point—no, two," Corbett said. "I'm not clear on the window screen. You did say the dab of honey was inside the screen—that is, indoors."

"Oh, it wasn't insect screen. It was just ordinary mesh—to stop human thieves or prowlers, not bees. What's the second point?"

"You never spent any large amounts—nobody did."

"Of course not. I held my three ounces for a year, then sold—not to Russia, although I could have got a higher price there. No, it was easy to find a discreet buyer in this country; every manufacturer was begging for the isotope—we couldn't make it fast enough. No questions asked, and full price or more. I kept the cash five years before spending a dime, even though it was in small, unmarked bills. There was no hurry; it was as much a matter of revenge as profit. I wouldn't have cared if my bees got away with half of it—never took it to the hive. But luckily that didn't happen. Hell, with hungry larvae waiting, my little accomplices would have cleaned out Stapledon if I had put bigger dabs of honey on the sill. You've no idea how hard and fast bees can work; three ounces was nothing."

He paused, took a sip of coffee, and waited. "Now, isn't that a simple solution for a crime no one could solve?"

For a moment the detective was silent; then an irrepressible Irish grin lightened his face.

"I never did like Stapledon," he said. "Besides, I'm retired; the statute of limitations has taken over—and I love honey!"

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	AGATHA CHRISTIE
TITLE:	*The Quickness of the Hand*
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Hercule Poirot
LOCALE:	On the Mediterranean Sea
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Mrs. Clapperton: "But really, M. Poirot, what would one be if one wasn't alive?"* *Poirot: "Dead."* *Mrs. Clapperton frowned. The reply was not to her liking . . .*

COLONEL CLAPPERTON!" SAID GENeral Forbes. He said it with an effect midway between a snort and a sniff.

Miss Ellie Henderson leaned forward, a strand of her soft gray hair blowing across her face. Her eyes, dark and snapping, gleamed with a wicked pleasure.

"Such a *soldierly*-looking man!" she said with malicious intent, and smoothed back the lock of hair to await the result.

"Soldierly!" exploded General Forbes. He tugged at his military mustache and his face became bright-red.

"In the Guards, wasn't he?" murmured Miss Henderson, completing her work.

"Guards? Guards? Pack of nonsense. Fellow was on the music hall stage! Fact! Joined up and was out in France counting tins of plum and apple. Huns dropped a stray bomb and he went home with a flesh wound in the arm. Somehow or other got into Lady Carrington's hospital."

"So that's how they met."

"Fact! Fellow played the wounded hero. Lady Carrington had no sense and oceans of money. Old Carrington had been in munitions. She'd been a widow only six months. This fellow snaps her up in no time. She wangled him a job at the War Office. *Colonel* Clapperton! Pah!" he snorted.

"And before the war he was on

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the music hall stage," mused Miss Henderson, trying to reconcile the distinguished gray-haired Colonel Clapperton with a red-nosed comedian singing mirth-provoking songs.

"Fact!" said General Forbes. "Heard it from old Bassington-ffrench. And he heard it from old Badger Cotterill who'd got it from Snooks Parker."

Miss Henderson nodded brightly. "That does seem to settle it," she said.

A fleeting smile showed for a minute on the face of a small man sitting near them. Miss Henderson noticed the smile. She was observant. It had shown appreciation of the irony underlying her last remark—irony which the General never for a moment suspected.

The General himself did not notice the smile. He glanced at his watch, rose, and remarked, "Exercise. Got to keep oneself fit on a boat," and went out through the open door onto the deck.

Miss Henderson glanced at the man who had smiled. It was a well-bred glance indicating that she was ready to enter into conversation with a fellow traveler.

"He is energetic—yes?" said the little man.

"He goes round the deck forty-eight times exactly," said Miss Henderson. "What an old gossip! And they say *we* are the scandal-loving sex."

"What an impoliteness!"

"Frenchmen are always polite," said Miss Henderson—there was the nuance of a question in her voice.

The little man responded promptly. "Belgian, Mademoiselle."

"Oh! Belgian."

"Hercule Poirot. At your service."

The name aroused some memory. Surely she had heard it before—? "Are you enjoying this trip, M. Poirot?"

"Frankly, no. It was an imbecility to allow myself to be persuaded to come. I detest *la mer*. Never does it remain tranquil—no, not for a little minute."

"Well, you admit it's quite calm now."

M. Poirot admitted this grudgingly. "*A ce moment*, yes. That is why I revive. I once more interest myself in what passes around me—your very adept handling of the General Forbes, for instance."

"You mean—" Miss Henderson paused.

Hercule Poirot bowed. "Your methods of extracting the scandalous matter. Admirable!"

Miss Henderson laughed in an unashamed manner. "That touch about the Guards? I knew that would bring the old boy up spluttering and gasping." She leaned forward confidentially. "I admit I *like* scandal—the more ill-natured, the better!"

Poirot looked thoughtfully at her—her slim well-preserved figure,

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her keen dark eyes, her gray hair—a woman of forty-five who was content to look her age.

Ellie said abruptly, "I have it! Aren't you the famous detective?"

Poirot bowed. "You are too amiable, Mademoiselle." But he made no disclaimer.

"How thrilling," said Miss Henderson. "Are you 'hot on the trail,' as they say in books? Have we a criminal secretly in our midst? Or am I being indiscreet?"

"Not at all. Not at all. It pains me to disappoint your expectations, but I am simply here, like everyone else, to amuse myself."

He said it in such a gloomy voice that Miss Henderson laughed.

"Oh! Well, you will be able to get ashore tomorrow at Alexandria. You have been to Egypt before?"

"Never, Mademoiselle."

Miss Henderson rose somewhat abruptly. "I think I shall join the General on his constitutional," she announced.

Poirot sprang politely to his feet.

She gave him a little nod and walked out onto the deck.

A faintly puzzled look showed for a moment in Poirot's eyes; then, a little smile creasing his lips, he rose, put his head through the door and glanced down the deck. Miss Henderson was leaning against the rail talking to a tall, soldierly-looking man.

Poirot's smile deepened. He drew himself back into the smoking room with the same exaggerated care with which a tortoise withdraws itself into its shell. For the moment he had the smoking room to himself, though he rightly conjectured that would not last long.

It did not. Mrs. Clapperton, her carefully waved platinum head protected with a net, her massaged and dieted form dressed in a smart sports suit, came through the door from the bar with the purposeful air of a woman who has always been able to pay top price for anything she needed.

She said, "John—? Oh! Good morning, M. Poirot—have you seen John?"

"He's on the starboard deck, Madame. Shall I—?"

She arrested him with a gesture. "I'll sit here a minute." She sat down in a regal fashion in the chair opposite him. From the distance she had looked a possible 28. Now, in spite of her exquisitely made-up face, her delicately plucked eyebrows, she looked not her actual 49 years, but a possible 55. Her eyes were a hard pale blue with tiny pupils.

"I was sorry not to have seen you at dinner last night," she said. "It was just a shade choppy, of course—"

"Précisément," said Poirot with feeling.

"Luckily, I am an excellent sailor," said Mrs. Clapperton. "I say luckily, because, with my weak heart, seasickness would probably be the death of me."

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"You have the weak heart, Madame?"

"Yes, I have to be *most* careful. I must *not* overtire myself! *All* the specialists say so." Mrs. Clapperton had embarked on the—to her—ever-fascinating topic of her health. "John, poor darling, wears himself out trying to prevent me from doing too much. I live so intensely, if you know what I mean, M. Poirot?"

"Yes, yes."

"He always says to me, 'Try to be more of a vegetable, Adeline.' But I can't. Life was meant to be *lived,* I feel. As a matter of fact I wore myself out as a girl in the war. My hospital—you've heard of my hospital? Of course I had nurses and matrons and all that—but *I* actually ran it." She sighed.

"Your vitality is marvelous, dear lady," said Poirot, with the slightly mechanical air of one responding to his cue.

Mrs. Clapperton gave a girlish laugh.

"Everyone tells me how young I am! It's absurd. I never try to pretend I'm a day less than forty-three," she continued with slightly mendacious candor, "but a lot of people find it hard to believe. 'You're so *alive,* Adeline,' they say to me. But really, M. Poirot, what would one *be* if one wasn't alive?"

"Dead," said Poirot.

Mrs. Clapperton frowned. The reply was not to her liking. The man, she decided, was trying to be funny. She got up and said coldly, "I must find John."

As she stepped through the door she dropped her handbag. It opened and the contents flew far and wide. Poirot rushed gallantly to the rescue. It was some few minutes before the lipsticks, vanity boxes, cigarette case and lighter, and other odds and ends were collected. Mrs. Clapperton thanked him politely, then she swept down the deck and called out, "John—"

Colonel Clapperton was still deep in conversation with Miss Henderson. He swung round and came quickly to meet his wife. He bent over her protectively. Her deck chair—was it in the right place? Wouldn't it be better—? His manner was courteous, full of gentle consideration. Clearly an adored wife spoiled by an adoring husband.

Miss Ellie Henderson looked out at the horizon as though something about it rather disgusted her.

Standing in the smoking-room door, Poirot looked on.

A hoarse quavering voice behind him said, "I'd take a hatchet to that woman if I were her husband." The old gentleman known disrespectfully among the Younger Set on board as the Grandfather of All the Tea Planters, had just shuffled in. "Boy!" he called. "Get me a whisky peg."

Poirot stooped to retrieve a torn scrap of notepaper, an overlooked item from the contents of Mrs.

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Clapperton's bag. Part of a prescription, he noted, containing digitalin. He put it in his pocket, meaning to restore it to Mrs. Clapperton later.

"Yes," went on the aged passenger. "Poisonous woman. I remember a woman like that in Poona. In '87 that was."

"Did anyone take a hatchet to her?" inquired Poirot.

The old gentleman shook his head sadly.

"Worried her husband into his grave within the year. Clapperton ought to assert himself. Gives his wife her head too much."

"She holds the purse strings," said Poirot gravely.

"Ha, ha!" chuckled the old gentleman. "You've put the matter in a nutshell. Holds the purse strings. Ha, ha!"

Two girls burst into the smoking room. One had a round face with freckles and dark hair streaming out in a windswept confusion, the other had freckles and curly chestnut hair.

"A rescue—a rescue!" cried Kitty Mooney. "Pam and I are going to rescue Colonel Clapperton."

"From his wife," gasped Pamela Cregan.

"We think he's a *pet*. . . ."

"And she's just awful—she won't let him do *anything*," the two girls exclaimed.

"And if he isn't with her, he's usually grabbed by the Henderson woman. . . ."

"Who's nice. But terribly *old* . . ."

They ran out, gasping in between giggles, "A rescue—a rescue . . ."

That the rescue of Colonel Clapperton was no isolated sally, but a fixed project, was made clear that same evening when the eighteen-year-old Pam Cregan came up to Hercule Poirot, and murmured, "Watch us, M. Poirot. He's going to be cut out from under her nose and taken to walk in the moonlight on the boat deck."

It was just at that moment that Colonel Clapperton was saying, "I grant you the price of a Rolls Royce. But it's practically good for a lifetime. Now, my car—"

"*My* car, I think, John." Mrs. Clapperton's voice was shrill and penetrating.

He showed no annoyance at her ungraciousness. Either he was used to it by this time or else—

"Or else?" thought Poirot, and let himself speculate.

"Certainly, my dear, *your* car," Clapperton bowed to his wife and finished what he had been saying, perfectly unruffled.

"*Voilà ce qu'on appelle le pukka sahib,*" thought Poirot. "But the General Forbes says that Clapperton is no gentleman at all. I wonder."

There was a suggestion of bridge. Mrs. Clapperton, General Forbes, and a hawk-eyed couple sat down to it. Miss Henderson had excused herself and gone out on deck.

"What about your husband?" asked General Forbes, hesitating.

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"John won't play," said Mrs. Clapperton. "Most tiresome."

The bridge players began shuffling the cards.

Pam and Kitty advanced on Colonel Clapperton. Each one took an arm.

"You're coming with us!" said Pam. "To the boat deck. There's a moon."

"Don't be foolish, John," said Mrs. Clapperton. "You'll catch a chill."

"Not with us, he won't," said Kitty. "We're hot stuff!"

He went with them, laughing.

Poirot noticed that Mrs. Clapperton said No Bid to her partner's opening bid of Two Clubs.

He strolled out onto the promenade deck. Miss Henderson was standing by the rail. She looked round expectantly as he came to stand beside her and he saw the drop in her expression.

They chatted for a while. Then presently, as he fell silent, she asked, "What are you thinking about?"

Poirot replied "I am wondering about my knowledge of English. Mrs. Clapperton said, 'John won't play bridge.' Is not 'can't play' the usual term?"

"She takes it as a personal insult that he doesn't, I suppose," said Ellie drily. "The man was a fool ever to have married her."

In the darkness Poirot smiled. "You don't think it's just possible that the marriage may be a success?" he asked diffidently.

"With a woman like that?"

Poirot shrugged. "Many odious women have devoted husbands. An enigma of Nature. You will admit that nothing she says or does appears to gall him."

Miss Henderson was considering her reply when Mrs. Clapperton's voice floated out through the smoking-room window.

"No—I don't think I will play another rubber. So stuffy. I think I'll go up and get some air on the boat deck."

"Goodnight," said Miss Henderson. "I'm going to bed." She disappeared abruptly.

Poirot strolled forward to the lounge—deserted save for Colonel Clapperton and the two girls. He was doing card tricks for them, and noting the dexterity of his handling of the cards, Poirot remembered the General's story of a career on the music hall stage.

"I see you enjoy the cards even though you do not play bridge," he remarked.

"I've my reasons for not playing bridge," said Clapperton, his charming smile breaking out. "I'll show you. We'll play one hand."

He dealt the cards rapidly. "Pick up your hands. Well, what about it?" He laughed at the bewildered expression on Kitty's face. He laid down his hand and the others followed suit. Kitty held the entire club suit, M. Poirot all the hearts, Pam all the diamonds, and Colonel Clapperton all the spades.

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"You see?" he said. "A man who can deal his partner and his adversaries any hand he pleases had better stand aloof from a friendly game! If the luck goes too much his way, ill-natured things might be said."

"Oh!" gasped Kitty. "How *could* you do that? It all looked perfectly ordinary."

"The quickness of the hand deceives the eye," said Poirot sententiously—and caught the sudden change in the Colonel's expression.

It was as though he realized that he had been off his guard for a moment or two.

Poirot smiled. The conjuror had shown himself through the mask of the *pukka sahib.*

The ship reached Alexandria at dawn the following morning.

As Poirot came up from breakfast he found the two girls ready to go on shore. They were talking to Colonel Clapperton.

"We ought to get off now," urged Kitty. "The passport people will be going off the ship presently. You'll come with us, won't you? You wouldn't let us go ashore all by ourselves? Awful things might happen to us."

"I certainly don't think you ought to go by yourselves," said Clapperton, smiling. "But I'm not sure my wife feels up to it."

"That's too bad," said Pam. "But she can have a nice long rest."

Colonel Clapperton looked a little irresolute. Evidently the desire to play truant was strong upon him. He noticed Poirot.

"Hullo, M. Poirot—you going ashore?"

"No, I think not," M. Poirot replied.

"I'll—I'll—just have a word with Adeline," decided Colonel Clapperton.

"We'll come with you," said Pam. She flashed a wink at Poirot. "Perhaps we can persuade her to come too," she added gravely.

Colonel Clapperton seemed to welcome this suggestion. He looked decidedly relieved.

"Come along then, the pair of you," he said lightly. They all three went along the passage of B deck together.

Poirot, whose cabin was just opposite the Clappertons, followed them out of curiosity.

Colonel Clapperton rapped a little nervously at the cabin door.

"Adeline, my dear, are you up?"

The sleepy voice of Mrs. Clapperton from within replied, "Oh bother—what is it?"

"It's John. What about going ashore?"

"Certainly not." The voice was shrill and decisive. "I've had a very bad night. I shall stay in bed most of the day."

Pam nipped in quickly, "Oh, Mrs. Clapperton, I'm so sorry. We did so want you to come with us. Are you sure you're not up to it?"

"I'm quite certain." Mrs. Clap-

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perton's voice sounded even shriller.

The Colonel was turning the door handle without result.

"What is it, John? The door's locked. I don't want to be disturbed by the stewards."

"Sorry, my dear. Just wanted my Baedeker."

"Well, you can't have it," snapped Mrs. Clapperton. "I'm not going to get out of bed. Do go away, John, and let me have a little peace."

"Certainly, my dear." The Colonel backed away from the door. Pam and Kitty closed in on him.

"Let's start at once. Oh, gracious —your passport isn't in the cabin, is it?"

"As a matter of fact it's in my pocket—" began the Colonel.

Kitty squeezed his arm. "Glory be!" she exclaimed. "Now, come on."

Leaning over the rail, Poirot watched the three of them leave the ship. He heard a faint intake of breath beside him and turned his head to see Miss Henderson. Her eyes were fastened on the three retreating figures.

"So they've gone ashore," she said flatly.

"Yes. Are you going?"

She wore a shade hat, he noticed, and a smart bag and shoes. There was a shore-going appearance about her. Nevertheless, after the most infinitesimal of pauses, she shook her head.

"No," she said. "I think I'll stay on board. I have a lot of letters to write."

She turned and left him.

Puffing after his morning tour of the deck, General Forbes took her place. "Aha!" he exclaimed as his eyes noted the retreating figures of the Colonel and the two girls. "So *that's* the game! Where's the Madam?"

Poirot explained that Mrs. Clapperton was having a quiet day in bed.

"Don't you believe it!" The old warrior closed one knowing eye. "She'll be up for tiffin—and if the poor devil's found to be absent without leave, there'll be ructions."

But the General's prognostications were not fulfilled. Mrs. Clapperton did not appear at lunch and by the time the Colonel and his attendant damsels returned to the ship at four o'clock, she had not shown herself.

Poirot was in his cabin and heard the husband's slightly guilty knock on his cabin door. He heard the knock repeated, the cabin door tried, and finally heard the Colonel's call to a steward.

"Look here, I can't get an answer. Have you a key?"

Poirot rose quickly from his bunk and came out into the passage.

The news went like wildfire round the ship. With horrified incredulity people heard that Mrs. Clapperton had been found dead in her bunk—a native dagger driven

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through her heart. A string of amber beads was found on the floor of her cabin.

Rumor succeeded rumor. All bead sellers who had been allowed on board that day were being rounded up and questioned. A large sum in cash had disappeared from a drawer in the cabin. The notes had been traced. They had not been traced. Jewelry worth a fortune had been taken. No jewelry had been taken at all. A steward had been arrested and had confessed to the murder.

"What is the truth of it all?" demanded Miss Ellie Henderson, waylaying Poirot. Her face was pale and troubled.

"My dear lady, how should I know?"

"Of course you know."

It was late in the evening. Most people had retired to their cabins. Miss Henderson led Poirot to a couple of deck chairs on the sheltered side of the ship. "Now tell me," she commanded.

Poirot surveyed her thoughtfully. "It's an interesting case," he said.

"Is it true that she had some very valuable jewelry stolen?"

Poirot shook his head. "No. No jewelry was taken. A small amount of loose cash that was in a drawer has disappeared, though."

"I'll never feel safe on a ship again," said Miss Henderson with a shiver. "Any clue as to who did it?"

"No," said Hercule Poirot. "The whole thing is rather—strange."

"What do you mean?" asked Ellie sharply.

Poirot spread out his hands. "*Eh bien*—take the facts. Mrs. Clapperton had been dead at least five hours when she was found. Some money had disappeared. A string of beads was on the floor by her bed. The door was locked and the key was missing. The window—*window*, not porthole—gives on the deck and was open."

"Well?" asked the woman impatiently.

"Do you not think it is curious for a murder to be committed under those particular circumstances? Remember that the postcard sellers, money changers, and bead sellers who are allowed on board are all well-known to the police."

"The stewards usually lock your cabin, all the same," Ellie pointed out.

"Yes, to prevent any chance of petty pilfering. But this was—murder."

"What exactly are you thinking, M. Poirot?" Her voice sounded a little breathless.

"I am thinking of the locked door."

Miss Henderson considered this. "I don't see anything in that. The murderer left by the door, locked it, and took the key with him so as to avoid having the murder discovered too soon. Quite intelligent of him, for it wasn't discovered until four o'clock in the afternoon."

"No, no, Mademoiselle, you don't

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appreciate the point I'm trying to make. I'm not worried as to how he got *out,* but as to how he got *in.*"

"The window, of course."

"*C'est possible.* But it would be a very narrow fit—and there were people passing up and down the deck all the time."

"Then through the door," said Miss Henderson impatiently.

"But you forget, Mademoiselle. Mrs. Clapperton had locked the door on the inside. She had done so before Colonel Clapperton left the boat this morning. He actually tried it—so we know that is so."

"Nonsense. It probably stuck—or he didn't turn the handle properly."

"But it does not rest on his word. We actually heard Mrs. Clapperton herself say so."

"We?"

"Miss Mooney, Miss Cregan, Colonel Clapperton, and myself."

Ellie Henderson tapped a neatly shod foot. She did not speak for a moment or two. Then she said in a slightly irritable tone, "Well—what exactly do you deduce from that? If Mrs. Clapperton could lock the door she could unlock it too, I suppose."

"Precisely, precisely." Poirot turned a beaming face upon her. "And you see where that leads us. Mrs. Clapperton unlocked the door and let the murderer in. Now would she be likely to do that for a bead seller?"

Ellie objected: "She might not have known who it was. He may have knocked—she got up and opened the door—and he forced his way in and killed her."

Poirot shook his head. "*Au contraire.* She was lying peacefully in bed when she was stabbed."

Miss Henderson stared at him. "What's your idea?" she asked abruptly.

Poirot smiled. "Well, it looks, does it not, as though she knew the person she admitted . . ."

"You mean," said Miss Henderson, and her voice sounded a little harsh, "that the murderer is a passenger on the ship?"

Poirot nodded. "It seems indicated."

"And the string of beads left on the floor was a blind?"

"Precisely."

"The theft of money also?"

"Exactly."

There was a pause, then Miss Henderson said slowly, "I thought Mrs. Clapperton a very unpleasant woman and I don't think anyone on board really liked her—but there wasn't anyone who had any reason to kill her."

"Except her husband, perhaps," said Poirot.

"You don't really think—" She stopped.

"It is the opinion of every person on this ship that Colonel Clapperton would have been quite justified in 'taking a hatchet to her.' That was, I think, the expression used."

Ellie Henderson looked at him—waiting.

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"But I am bound to say," went on Poirot, "that I myself have not noted any signs of exasperation on the good Colonel's part. Also, what is more important, he has an alibi. He was with those two girls all day and did not return to the ship till four o'clock. By then, Mrs. Clapperton had been dead many hours."

There was another minute of silence. Ellie Henderson said softly, "But you still think—a passenger on the ship?"

Poirot bowed his head.

Ellie Henderson laughed suddenly—a reckless defiant laugh. "Your theory may be difficult to prove, M. Poirot. There are a good many passengers on this ship."

Poirot bowed to her. "I will use a phrase from one of your detective story writers. 'I have my methods, Watson.'"

The following evening, at dinner, every passenger found a typewritten slip by his plate requesting him to be in the main lounge at 8:30. When the company were assembled, the Captain stepped onto the raised platform where the orchestra usually played, and addressed them.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, you all know of the tragedy which took place yesterday. I am sure you all wish to cooperate in bringing the perpetrator of that foul crime to justice." He paused and cleared his throat. "We have on board with us M. Hercule Poirot who is probably known to you all as a man who has had wide experience in—er—such matters. I hope you will listen carefully to what he has to say."

It was at this minute that Colonel Clapperton, who had not been at dinner, came in and sat down next to General Forbes: He looked like a man bewildered by sorrow—not at all like a man conscious of great relief. Either he was a very good actor or else he had been genuinely fond of his disagreeable wife.

"M. Hercule Poirot," said the Captain, and stepped down. Poirot took his place. He looked comically self-important as he beamed on his audience.

"Messieurs, Mesdames," he began. "It is most kind of you to be so indulgent as to listen to me. *M. le Capitaine* has told you that I have had a certain experience in these matters. I have, it is true, a little idea of my own about how to get to the bottom of this particular case."

He made a sign and a steward pushed forward and passed up to him a bulky, shapeless object wrapped in a sheet.

"What I am about to do may surprise you a little." Poirot warned them. "It may occur to you that I am eccentric, perhaps mad. Nevertheless, I assure you that behind my madness there is—as you English say—a method."

His eyes met those of Miss Henderson for just a moment. He began unwrapping the bulky object.

"I have here, *Messieurs et Mesdames,* an important witness to the

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truth of who killed Mrs. Clapperton."

With a deft hand he whisked away the last enveloping cloth, and the object it concealed was revealed —an almost life-sized wooden doll, dressed in a velvet suit and lace collar.

"Now, Arthur," said Poirot, and his voice changed subtly—it was no longer foreign—it had instead a slightly Cockney inflection. "Can you tell me—I repeat—can you tell me—anything at all about the death of Mrs. Clapperton?"

The doll's neck oscillated a little, its wooden lower jaw dropped and wavered, and a shrill high-pitched woman's voice spoke:

"What is it, John? The door's locked. I don't want to be disturbed by the stewards . . ."

There was a cry—an overturned chair—a man stood swaying, his hand to his throat—trying to speak —trying . . . Then, suddenly, his figure seemed to crumple up. He pitched headlong.

It was Colonel Clapperton.

Poirot and the ship's doctor rose from their knees by the prostrate figure.

"All over, I'm afraid. Heart," said the doctor briefly.

Poirot nodded. "The shock of having his trick seen through," he said.

He turned to General Forbes. "It was you, General, who gave me a valuable hint with your mention of the music hall stage. I puzzle—I think—and then it comes to me. Supposing that before the war Clapperton was a *ventriloquist*. In that case, it would be perfectly possible for three people to hear Mrs. Clapperton speak from inside her cabin *when she was already dead . . .*"

Ellie Henderson was beside him. Her eyes were dark and full of pain. "Did you know his heart was weak?" she asked.

"I guessed it . . . Mrs. Clapperton talked of her own heart being affected, but she struck me as the type of woman who likes to be thought ill. Then I picked up a torn prescription for digitalin. Now, digitalin is a heart medicine but it couldn't be Mrs. Clapperton's because digitalin dilates the pupils of the eyes. I had never noticed such a phenomenon with her."

Ellie murmured, "So you thought —it might end—this way—for him?"

"The best way, don't you think, Mademoiselle?" he said gently.

He saw the tears rise in her eyes. She said, "You've known. You've known all along . . . that I cared. But he didn't do it for *me* . . . It was those girls—youth—it made him feel his slavery. He wanted to be free before it was too late . . . Yes, I'm sure that's how it was . . . When did you guess—that it was he?"

"His self-control was too perfect," said Poirot simply. "No matter how galling his wife's conduct, it never

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seemed to touch him. That meant either that he was so used to it that it no longer stung him, or else—*eh bien*—I decided on the latter alternative . . . And I was right.

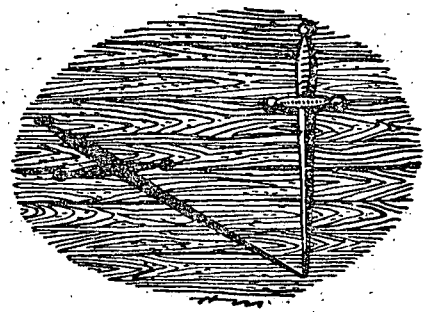
"And then there was his insistence on his conjuring ability—the evening before the crime. He pretended to give himself away. But a man like Clapperton doesn't give himself away. There must be a reason. So long as people thought he had been a *conjuror* they weren't likely to think of his having been a *ventriloquist*."

"And the voice we heard from the platform—Mrs. Clapperton's voice?"

"One of the stewardesses had a voice not unlike hers. I induced her to hide behind the stage and told her the words to say."

"It was a trick—a cruel trick," Ellie cried out.

"I do not approve of murder," said Hercule Poirot.



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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **LEO DAMORE**

TITLE: ***High Stakes***

TYPE: Gambling Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Alex had mentioned this psychological theory he'd read, and Borden had promptly called it "rot." Well, there was only one way to prove who was right . . .*

IT HAD STARTED AS A DISCUSSION—a mere difference of opinion during dinner on the loggia that looked across the open marble-tiled courtyard to the wide pool's turquoise ripplets, and beyond the exquisitely regal, Grecian-columned gazebo to the faraway mountains obscured by desert mist, mauve and hovering in the hot distance.

And later, with darkness following the waning bursts of florid sunset in the thick, tinted window-walls of the library, the discussion had erupted with an ugly suddenness, despite Alex Nicolson's obvious attempts to fend it off.

"I suppose it's just an interesting theory, that's all," Alex said, deliberately keeping his voice mild and unemphasized.

But it was too late.

Borden Struther was not going to let Alex off so easily. "It's a lot of stupid *rot*, if you ask me!" he said. His voice had grown surly and abrupt during the past hour as he kept drinking the brandies that made his large and handsomely grizzled face red and angry-looking.

He was a superb specimen of a man at 51, Alex conceded, looking up at Borden standing against the massive graystone fireplace, his thick chest spreading the checkered shirt taut. He wore faded cotton pants and espadrilles.

Alex said nothing in the silence that followed, and Borden refilled his glass.

No one took offense or seized a challenge—no matter how veiled or subtle it might be—as quickly as Borden Struther. Alex knew Bor-

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den's susceptibilities well. In fact, it would seem that Borden enjoyed challenges rather too much; it gave him an opportunity for the massive assault he could always bring to it, arrogant in the knowledge of his own powers and inevitably victorious—as he always was. Just as he had defeated nature herself, snatching these seven acres from the desert's arid, hot grasp to build his sumptuous, elaborate house despite every incredible obstacle, so his arrogance prevailed over all resistance.

The lawns flaunted their greenness in the face of the vast emptiness of dust and sun—the sod had been brought by railroad car in great packed rolls; and now an underground network of elaborate piping kept feeding the lawns a steady nourishment of water and protective chemicals.

The swimming pool was stupendous—as large as a Roman bath and deep enough to accommodate a high diving board; and, with a perverseness that Borden enjoyed exhibiting—and despite the preciousness of water in the desert—the pool was drained once a week and scoured of all desert dust and nettles.

Borden was, Alex acknowledged, a remarkable man in many ways, and now Alex waited to see which path his vindictiveness would take—to correct the error of imprudence that Alex had committed by contradicting The Great Man himself.

"It's really not worth arguing about," Alex said in a conciliatory tone, sipping his drink and making his voice as unprovocative as he had tried to make it at dinner when he had first mentioned, as casual table conversation, the subject in question.

"The article points out that sometimes the loss of one faculty can directly affect the performance of a learned ability not immediately involved." Alex had gone on to cite examples: even though hearing, say, is not directly involved in someone's driving a car, sometimes it happened that the newly deaf suffered a lessening of their driving ability because of their new handicap; or the loss of sight *could* impair a person's ability to swim, even though the eyes are not directly involved in the act of swimming.

"I suppose there are psychological factors, too," Alex had said, accepting another portion of the asparagus which Borden had found some clever way to grow in the desert. "But it probably is more a question of balance—of the body's natural and automatic tendency to use *all* its faculties in doing things like swimming or driving a car, even when we're not aware that all faculties are being used."

Borden Struther was a superb swimmer who frequently performed his specialties on the high diving board for the enjoyment and admiration of his invited guests, and it had been the reference to swimming which had obviously incited Borden at first.

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"You mean to say that *I* couldn't swim if I went blind?" Borden asked sarcastically. "Or was blindfolded?"

"No, not necessarily," Alex said carefully, and hesitated. "It might affect your—well, your prowess, say. The article did point out that there are individual differences, of course—"

"It wouldn't make *any* difference!" Borden broke in. "Why, I could swim asleep!" he added, tossing off his drink.

Alex hesitated again, then said. "You're right, of course."

But Borden was not satisfied. "You say that as if you meant the opposite," he objected, almost pouncing, his black eyes glittering with the prospect of a victim. "How much do you want to bet me that I can swim just as well blindfolded as not?"

There was a movement from the sofa—a soft, floating pink against the vivid colors of the room.

"Ann!" Borden said. "Where are you going?"

The girl turned without stopping. "Just to get some aspirin," she said, bringing a pale hand to her face. She had excused herself after dinner and had reappeared in the library a half hour later. "I have a headache," she said.

"You're coming back?" Borden said gruffly. "Aren't you?"

He must have an audience, Alex thought, knowing that Borden never performed without one.

"Yes," Ann said.

Alex followed her progress out of the room. She was incredibly beautiful. Borden had seen her photograph on a magazine cover, had decided she was what he wanted, and after conducting a spectacular siege, had brought her back to the desert with him as his wife.

She was, Alex knew, no more than twenty-six.

There were no children.

"Get me some bathing trunks," Borden called out to her before she left the room. "And some sort of blindfold—"

"Wait a minute—" Alex started to protest, but Borden cut him off, throwing him a derisive glance.

"I thought you believed in all this psychological claptrap," Borden said, kicking off the espadrilles. His feet were long, the tendons flexing against a thin scattering of blond hair on a tanned skin. "Here's your chance to prove you're right."

"I didn't say that." But Alex knew it was futile.

"I suppose that's what they taught you in all those fancy schools in the east where your folks sent you," Borden went on, almost petulantly. His face made no attempt to disguise his scorn of Alex, now slumped in his chair, holding the warm, ice-melted drink in his hand, saying nothing, knowing how Borden hated college men, knowing how contemptuously The Great Man regarded any kind of weakness, or anyone who had failed.

The Nicolson Furniture Company

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had been, up to two years before, a highly regarded and very old family business that, on the verge of bankruptcy, had saved itself by merging with Struther Enterprises, a complex of holding companies that Borden Struther personally controlled. Then, galvanized by Struther's ferocity and unbridled confidence, the old company experienced an astonishing resurgence.

The only Nicolson who had been retained after the merger was Alex, as figurehead president because, as Borden had so bluntly put it, he was "the only halfway presentable one in the whole rotten bunch."

Alex slumped deeper in his chair, now feeling the cold breath of the vigorous air conditioning on the back of his neck.

"Well, now, let's see." Borden was saying. "Let's make it a decent stake, at least. How about a thousand—no, make it two thousand."

Alex said nothing for a moment, knowing Borden was toying with him, his eyes intent on Alex's reaction. It was a good deal more money than Alex could afford to lose; but to confess his poverty would be a mistake, he realized, an admission of weakness and defeat. Borden would loathe him all the more for it.

"All right," Alex said as calmly as he could; and looking up he caught Ann's sympathetic eyes on him as she re-entered the room, and an almost imperceptible nodding of her head in approval.

She dropped the swim trunks in a chair. "Borden, *please*, I wish you wouldn't—"

Borden cut her off, "Nonsense, Ann. Besides, this doesn't concern you anyway." He went to the bar and replenished his glass. "So stay out of it!"

She was really too blonde, too fragile for the desert, Alex thought. Her beauty was a Wedgwood's delicacy, to be cherished with tenderness. Her eyes were now pale and unhappy. Alex sent her a brief look of compassion.

"Where's the blindfold?" Borden said shortly.

She withdrew a hand from the pocket of her dress. It held a narrow headband of black linen.

"That's fine," Borden said, reaching for it and grinning. "The two thousand's yours, tootsie," he laughed loudly. "You can buy yourself a new hat."

"Borden," Ann said worriedly. "You might get hurt." Then, after a pause, her voice fell to a whisper. "I wish you wouldn't—I really do."

His face became angry. Alex knew that her protests would do nothing but goad him on.

Borden drew off his shirt, kicked off his pants, and pulled on the swim trunks. "Tie this blindfold for me, will you, Ann?" he said, bending forward.

Alex sat in his chair, finishing his cigarette, watching intently. Then he rose to his feet and pulled a book of matches from his jacket, lit a

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match, and held it close to Borden's face.

"Well?" Borden said, not flinching. "Let's go."

"Wait a bit longer," Alex suggested. "Get a little more used to the dark."

Ann lit a cigarette during the silent interval that followed, and avoiding Alex's face, tried to calm the trembling of her hands.

She looked ill, Alex thought. The desert was so wrong for her—that fine skin of hers with blue veins tracing the line of her jaw, the skin that took the sun so badly that she had to avoid it with wide-brimmed hats and sun shields. The nights were lonely for her too, with Borden away on business so often and no servants who could be persuaded to "live in." The nearest village was six miles away.

"C'mon," Borden grunted irritably. "Let's go."

"All right," Alex said and took his arm. "I'll lead you."

They walked together across the room to the tall panel of sliding wood shutters and then out into the courtyard and the sweet dry smell of the desert night. The wind was cooler now as Alex, guiding Borden across the still-warm tiles, heard Ann's heels behind him.

"I'll take the high diving board," Borden said.

"Borden, *don't!*" Ann cried. "Not the high one!"

"Oh, be quiet, Ann!" Borden said rudely.

Alex made a swing around the pool's corner and walked down its long length.

"I'll climb up with you," Alex said, placing Borden's large-knuckled hands on the railings. "Wouldn't want you to trip and fall on the way up."

Alex followed him up, aware of the orderly rows of softly glowing pool-edge lights below and of Borden's wide muscular back above him, stiff with competence.

In a few moments they were standing on the coarse, hemp-knotted covering of the flexible board.

"You all right?" Alex said, behind him.

"Of course!" Borden said irritably. "How near am I to the end of the board?"

"About five or six inches," Alex said.

He saw Borden's right foot move out cautiously, his toes exploring. "Okay," he said confidently.

Alex turned and went back to the platform.

"I've got a float ready," he said. "In case you should need one."

He heard Borden's full-voiced roar of derisive laughter and then saw the muscles of his heavy legs tense and flex in the eerie pool lights as he jumped, testing the diving board's springing rhythm, and then, lifting his body in one beautiful high arc against the pale half-moon-lit sky, Borden plunged downward into the pool.

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The sound of the dive's impact stayed in Alex's ears as he ran down the tower's ladder; then, turning at the bottom, he ran to the shining rail at the pool's corner and began quickly to descend into the still-wet but newly drained pool.

"Is he—is he dead?" Ann said from the pool's edge above him.

Murder was, really, the simplest thing in the world, Alex thought, gingerly pulling off the stained, wet blindfold—especially if you understood the psychology of it and knew the victim as well as he had known Borden Struther.

"Of course, darling," Alex said, looking up at her.

EDITORS' QUERY: *What story are Alex and Ann going to tell the police? That Borden deliberately dove from the high board into an* empty *pool? Or are Alex and Ann planning to refill the pool and claim that Borden killed himself accidentally? But . . . yes, there are "buts" either way . . .*

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A strangely gripping story . . . about a peculiar fear, a recurring dream, night parachute jumping, suffocating panic, "plumb" foolishness (or was it magic?), dark and alien thoughts, "star bees," three pieces of white rice paper with red scrawls on them, two pennies . . . Can you resist reading this story now?

THE WATCHER IN THE DREAM

by MILDRED CLINGERMAN

THE HOUSE WAS VERY UGLY—ONE of those narrow three-story Queen Anne houses with scalloped siding and a turret. Back in the nineties some other woman, perhaps, had occupied the turret bedroom and considered it romantic. Sometimes in the late afternoons I'd lean my arms on the window sill and stare down through the green leaves of the tulip tree, watching for Hugh to turn into this quiet street, and I'd remember that tower rooms were the traditional vantage points for wives of soldiering husbands. There were half a dozen other wives waiting in that house for their men, but I knew that none of them waited with my peculiar fear.

As a matter of fact, Hugh and I felt ourselves very fortunate to be in that house. Hugh was neither an officer nor an officer candidate, and the landladies in that town upheld Army tradition by almost never mixing enlisted men with the officer caste. But our landlady had a streak of romance and rebellion. She also had a soft spot for the enlisted paratroopers, who seemed to represent for her the essence of the crazy wildness that Southern women find so attractive in men.

Moreover, I was able to fall into Southern speech at will. I had only to remember the tones of my grandmother's voice, and my tongue obligingly produced the sounds that made my landlady happy; my voice grew higher and draggingly sweet, and the rhythm of the words changed subtly. One used almost any weapon to acquire a room in those days, in that town. Mrs. Allen, our landlady, had grown very fond of me almost immediately.

The officers' wives were not in the least fond of me. We smiled coolly at one another when we passed on the stairway. They were punctilious about allowing me my turn in the bathroom, but the only conversation I'd ever had with any of them was once when the tall dark one ran out of cigarettes and borrowed a pack from me. She was in a great hurry to

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get back to her room and only paused long enough to tell me that the turret room was charming, really charming. Her enthusiasm alarmed me. I was afraid she wanted it for friends and might influence Mrs. Allen to make us move. But then I recalled Tall Dark's New Jersey accent and knew how unlikely it was that Mrs. Allen would ever be swayed by crisp consonants.

I ought to have been very lonely, I suppose. I was homesick for mountains and desert and distance, and I was often sickened by that hate and fear, so palpable in the South that it oppressed one's breathing at times; but I wasn't lonely.

Unless there was a night jump scheduled, Hugh came swinging down the street every afternoon, having been deposited at the corner by the bus labeled JORDAN, which one must always remember to pronounce "Jurdan." Later the two of us would sally forth for the evening meal, since the turret room had no cooking facilities.

So, except for the recurring dream that tortured me most nights, the evenings were good. I never told Hugh about the dream, and when I cried out in my sleep, he woke me with sleepy little kisses, murmuring all our familiar love words till I slept again.

I roused briefly when his alarm clock rang at 4:00 A.M. and lay blinking at the brightness of the overhead light while Hugh dressed, listening to the heavy sighing with which he greeted another day of soldiering. Watching his meticulous lacing of the paratrooper boots had such a hypnotic effect on me that generally I fell asleep again and never even heard his departure.

Mrs. Allen gave me coffee in the late mornings. She kept her coffee pot full all day—I was free to help myself. Several times a day she stood at the foot of the stairway and summoned me in her fluty, penetrating voice to come have a "dope" with her. Bottled cola drinks in the South were so strong they made me feel as if my scalp were floating, and I rarely managed to down more than one a day, while Mrs. Allen easily disposed of six or eight.

When Mrs. Allen wasn't drinking coffee or cola, which she drank always standing up, staring exhaustedly at the kitchen sink, she was following the colored maid around, exhorting and pleading in a sweetly despairing voice audible all over the house. Iris was a sullen-faced young woman who never swept the corners of rooms, but plied her broom in aimless circles while she gazed inscrutably at the cobwebs hanging from the high ceilings. One often met Iris carrying a mop bucket full of cold, greasy black water and dragging a string mop that resembled a tumbled heap of dark worms.

Between the two women there was sometimes an ominous silence that kept me confined to my room, despite my longing for coffee. There were days, I knew, when the wid-

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owed Mrs. Allen woke up "suffering" and dosed herself liberally with bourbon. The kitchen wasn't a pleasant spot on such mornings. But after a few hours I'd hear Iris and Mrs. Allen laughing together—shrieking, rather—their laughter so much alike I couldn't distinguish one voice from the other. I'd go down then and have my coffee before I dressed to leave the house for a late luncheon.

I was one of an army of wives that invaded the streets at that hour. Most of them walked in pairs like schoolgirls, eating together, shopping together, sharing little private jokes, and occasionally quarreling with the bitter intensity of bored women. I came to recognize many of these couples, and we all smiled and nodded, but I had no desire to join them, or to link myself with any of the other unattached women who made tentative efforts to form an alliance.

My reluctance was, I suppose, a kind of snobbery, but it was also a healthy effort to maintain some semblance of my normal civilian life which had never depended on just that type of feminine companionship.

I explored the town on foot and by bus. I spent hours in the library. The war was going badly for us at that time, and any day Hugh's group would be shipped out. In the meantime they were practicing night jumping with full equipment, and with this step-up in the training program my nightmare dream became more insistent, more detailed.

I became less and less able each morning to shake off the horror of the dream. Mrs. Allen began to chide me for looking so poorly. Even Iris, who had ignored me for the most part, began to cluck a soft, wordless counterpoint to Mrs. Allen's mournful inventory of all that was wrong with my appearance. I was much too pale, they assured me; my eyes looked like two burned holes in a blanket; my bones would soon be poking out of my skin.

Iris followed me back to my room one day carrying the mop bucket and the squirming mop, with the avowed intention of doing up my room for me. At her insistence I retreated to the bed while she smeared the middle of the worn linoleum with the liquid that resembled swamp water.

Her eyes flashed with something like friendliness when I offered her a cigarette and asked her to sit down a minute and talk to me. She dropped into the straight chair, as far away from me as she could get in that small room. For a while we simply smoked, avoiding each other's eyes, both of us acutely embarrassed.

Finally Iris said, "You 'bout worried sick?"

I shook my head. "I keep having the same dream," I said. "It's so real—I can't forget it in the daytime. It haunts me. I know it's silly to let it bother me so much . . ."

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My voice trailed off, and I tried to find something in the room to look at, because Iris's eyes were unreadable.

"Is it a real bad dream?"

"Horrible," I said. We stared earnestly at each other then for a long moment, and something stirred between the black woman and me—a tenuous thread of communication that seemed to dispel all the barriers we'd each put up. I forgot that I was not superstitious, and I realized I was asking for help. I can't be sure, but I think Iris forgot for an instant that I was white and too know-it-all to be deserving of help. In any case, her response came almost automatically.

"Tell Iris . . ."

I drew a deep breath and told her.

I told her about the inky night sky and the droning airplane and the tense men lined up in the aisle of the plane, waiting for the signal light that would tell them they were over their drop area.

I told her about Hugh, standing in the open door, just behind the lieutenant who was to lead off the jump. I saw the first man whisked out the door, with Hugh right behind him. I saw their grimacing faces when the opening shock hit them—somewhat comparable, I told Iris, to hitting a padded brick wall at eighty-five miles an hour. But this was all right, this was normal. It always happened when they hit the end of the static line and the chutes opened.

I told her about the expanse of white silk that billowed over Hugh's head for a moment, before it partially collapsed; of how he shook the lines, his head strained back, his voice cursing in the sudden silence; of how, finally, the chute blossomed out again, but with two panels blown. Beside him and above him, men called to one another—some laughing from relief of tension. One man, far off in the windy darkness, was talking coaxingly to his parachute, "Come on, baby, baby, baby—sweet baby."

Suddenly a voice warned, strident and angry, "Slip to the right! They've dropped us over the trees!"

Hugh reacted instantly, tugging at his lines. He began to oscillate. He seemed to be dropping faster, swinging in a great arc. Never mind. Get set for the landing fall, knees slightly bent and together, shoulders hunched for the rolling tumble, head down, chin in. Was that the ground? Don't tense . . .

He never saw the jagged, heavy fence post. His back was turned to it, and he could not know that it was slanted toward him, waiting like a giant fork. Only the watcher in the dream saw the fork spear the man through the back, and emerge, glistening and sticky, through his torn chest.

There wasn't any outcry from the man at all. It was the dreamer who cried out in horror and grief. The man hung there, impaled, while the uncollapsed 'chute danced angrily

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where it touched the meadow, tugging unmercifully at the dead man and the fence post . . .

Iris shuddered and opened her eyes. I found I'd been staring at one of the brass knobs at the foot of the bed, but I hadn't known I was looking at it. My eyes had been turned inward to the dreadful vision that was becoming more real than anything else in my life.

It was queer how the dream gathered details to itsel as time went by. At first I'd seen only the body on the fence post. I hadn't known it was Hugh. Little by little the dream had developed backward from that moment, till now it was as if I were accompanying Hugh in the airplane, jumping beside him, watching and listening, hovering near him in terrible anxiety and helplessness . . .

There was something else about the dream that frightened me. Hugh rarely spoke of his job to me. Was it possible for me to have gathered so much knowledge about his jumps from the little he'd said? Perhaps. I'd never jumped out of an airplane in my life and I hoped I never should. Still—it was just barely possible that I might imagine how it was. I think it was this daytime reasoning that had kept me free of the panic I now experienced.

Iris brought me a cigarette and lighted it with shaky hands. "What—what do you think, Iris?" I asked.

"It sound bad to me," Iris said. "You tried prayin'?"

I shook my head. "I—the truth is, Iris, I don't know how."

Iris looked at me in surprise. "Ain't you got faith?"

"I guess not." I turned away from Iris' eyes. They had a look that said I was a strange breed of cat.

"Don't you believe in nothing?"

I could tell that Iris was not so much censuring me as indulging her curiosity. "A few things, maybe. Bad things, mostly, I guess. Obviously I'm beginning to believe in this rotten dream."

"Yeah," Iris said, and it was comment enough. Clearly Iris regarded me as a pitiful object. "You got an idea?" she asked, after a long silence.

"None," I said. "I can't very well go to Hugh's commanding officer and ask him please not to make Hugh jump any more, because I've had a bad dream."

"No," Iris acknowledged. "You reckon your man could play sick?"

"He wouldn't do it. Anyway, I've never told him—I won't tell him—about the dream."

"You did right there," Iris said. "It would only fret him. When he gonna jump again?"

"I don't know. In a few days, I guess. He'll tell me beforehand."

"Well, now, listen," Iris said. "They *is* something you can do." She looked at me measuringly. "You got twenty dollars? That's what it costs—twenty dollars. And you gotta do just like I say. You just give me the money, heah? I'll

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fix it all up so's you don't need to worry. Now, listen . . ."

I listened with a kind of numbed distaste to the instructions Iris gave me. When she finished I protested that I could never, never believe in such foolishness, or magic, whatever she wanted to call it.

"You don't have to believe," Iris said. "They's others will do the believin'. You just pays the money. And anybody could do the rest of it —them two little bitty things I told you. Lordy! Ain't you willin' to spend any amount to save your man?"

I got up and found my purse and gave Iris a twenty-dollar bill. I didn't believe for a minute that she could help me any more than she'd helped me already, simply by listening to me.

"I gotta go," Iris said. "Remember, tomorrow, you listen for the strawberry man." She stood in the open doorway with the mop and pail. Just before she closed the door, she spoke again, her voice sly and amused. "Don't be surprised none if you start believin' in it yourself. Most folks *does* believe in the power of a twenty-dollar bill."

The next morning I got up and dressed much earlier than usual. When I went to the kitchen for coffee, the kitchen was empty, but I heard Iris and Mrs. Allen in the front part of the house. I didn't want to see Iris that day, so I drank my coffee hurriedly and sped back to my room to wait for the Negro peddlers whose distinctive calls would soon sound in the quiet street.

The first one to appear pushed a barrow filled with fresh black-eyed peas. "BACK! Ah, peace . . ." the man called, with a poignant, sorrowful cry. He got a good response from the housewives or their maids.

I leaned on my window sill to watch. After ten minutes or so of silence the street was filled with the cry of the strawberry man: "Star bees? RIPE star bees . . ."

It was a charming, plaintive question and answer. Often when I'd been lying half awake listening to it, I'd tried to imagine just what a "star bee" looked like, tempted to empty my purse for a swarm of them. This morning, though, the call meant something else to me, something dark and alien and faintly disgusting. Whatever it was I was buying from the man, I was certain it wasn't anything so nice as star bees.

He had rested his barrow directly beneath my window and stood there as if waiting for my appearance. I called down to him and gestured stiffly when he looked up at me. On my way down to him I was glad not to meet anyone on the stairs.

The strawberry man, I saw, was very old. He pulled a long wrinkled earlobe by way of greeting me. From his torn old coat he produced from an inside pocket a small gray envelope and handed it to me.

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"Iris sent me," I said unnecessarily, since I already held the envelope.

He nodded and seemed to look far beyond me. "You f'm Arizony?"

"Yes," I said.

"Cowboys," the old man murmured. "And Indians." He nodded positively at me as if to assure me that the world held endless riches. Then the old yellowed eyes filled with tears and his pendulous lower lip trembled. "Some *say* . . ." He looked a thousand questions at me, as if doubt tormented him.

"Oh, it's *true*," I answered, and his face lighted with delight.

I turned away then, because I didn't want the strawberry man to see in my eyes that the cowboys and Indians I knew were not in the least like the godlike creatures he dreamed of, that the mythical men he revered were exactly as numerous as star bees, and truth more elusive than either.

Back in my room I opened the small envelope and examined its contents—three pieces of white rice paper, scrawled all over with red ink. I recognized the paper as leaves from a book of cigarette papers. I couldn't make anything of the scrawled writing. If there were words written on the papers, they were in no language I had ever seen. Some of the words seemed to flow into minute, scratched pictures, one of which might have been a rooster, another a goat.

But, according to Iris' reiterated instructions, it wasn't a part of my task to decipher the markings. I had only to chew up the papers and swallow them.

You've gone this far, I told myself. Why balk now? The papers went down more easily than I had expected.

The next part was even simpler. I fished two pennies out of my change purse. As I slipped them into the evelope I saw that the rim of one of them was dented, as if someone had hit it hard with a hammer. I thought briefly that I ought to find a newer penny, but then decided not to bother; Iris had not stipulated as to the condition of the coins.

I left Mrs. Allen's house then and took a bus to town. From the bus terminal I walked eight blocks to the river. From the pedestrians' walk on the bridge I threw the envelope with its two pennies into the muddy water. Afterward I ate a good lunch and went to a movie, and I felt strangely peaceful.

I had scarcely returned to my turret room when Mrs. Allen called me to the telephone in the downstairs hallway.

"Sorry, darling," Hugh said. "I'll be late tonight. They've scheduled another jump. You'd better go have your dinner without me. I'm not sure just what time I'll get back. They've got a whole mob of us stacked up here at Malfunction Junction."

"Malfunction Junction" was the

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paratroopers' wry name for the airport . . .

It was a long evening. I wasn't hungry enough to go out to eat. I drank coffee with Mrs. Allen and ate a candy bar I found in our room.

I tried to read, but I was unable to bring to my reading the same quality of attention I usually devoted to it on the nights Hugh jumped. But that fact was, in a way, a relief. I hated ever to use reading as one uses a drug.

I sat in my room and tried to decide if I was as fearful as I had been over past jumps. Yes, but with a difference. What was it? For one thing, I was able to sit still without the anchor of a book. For another, I had made some kind of contact with the future, with tomorrow, by my imitation of an act of faith. Unable to believe for myself, I was yet able to believe that somebody, somewhere (more primitive, more gullible) was believing in my stead.

At ten o'clock, when the tall, dark girl from New Jersey knocked on my door, I was able to answer without any show of fear. How many times I'd waited for Hugh, terrified that somebody would come knocking at the door to tell me he was dead.

Seeing my light, she said, she'd come to borrow cigarettes again. She was appealingly shamefaced about it, remembering that she'd never paid back the first package. It took me a few moments to realize that she hadn't really come for that reason.

After I'd shared my cigarettes with her and invited her to sit down, she admitted she'd met Mrs. Allen hovering in the hallway, and that Mrs. Allen had asked her to step in and keep me company for a little while.

"My husband's away this evening too," the girl said. "Isn't this a dull hole to be stationed in?" We talked for an hour and then parted with shy friendliness.

At midnight I was still sitting in the lumpy old wing chair, numbly waiting for the sound of Hugh's boots on the stairway.

At 2:00 A.M., when he opened the door, I knew at once that something disastrous had happened. Hugh was very pale. I remembered thinking that he looked exactly as if somebody had dusted his face with flour.

He came to me at once and put his head against mine. His hands gripped my shoulders so hard I wanted to protest, but I didn't. I began to cry very quietly, and for a time neither of us spoke.

Finally Hugh said, "Three of them drifted into the river. All drowned. Lots of them landed in the trees, but none seriously injured. Two malfunctions—one man with a streamer hit the ground, still flipping at his lines. We yelled at him to pull the chest pack. It was as if he couldn't hear us. Was it windy here? Very windy over there across

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the river . . . I came down by a fence. You know those barbed-wire fences they have out in the country here? Like military entanglements, almost. There was a jagged post . . .

"Somebody yelled at me. Baby, it was close! What startled me—everybody, you know, was yelling tonight—was that it sounded like you. Whoever it was, some real young kid, I guess, he called me by my first name. He saved my life. It was a loused-up jump from the word go. The pilot must have seen what he thought was the ground signal—probably some farmer's lantern—and he thought he was over our drop area. It took hours to find everybody. Darling, darling, don't cry . . ."

Slowly Hugh relaxed enough to begin undressing for bed. He talked softly, monotonously, though, all the time he was unlacing his boots.

"Look, here and here, at the riser burns on my neck . . . And my helmet fell down over my face—separated from the helmet liner. Took me forever, it seemed, to shove it back so I could see anything. The opening shock was bad tonight. I blew two panels. Shook one old boy right out of his boots . . ."

Hugh pulled off one of his own boots, and a penny rolled out. He stared at it in disbelief, and then slowly pulled off the other boot and shook it. Another penny rolled across the floor.

"Now what stupid idiot did that?" Hugh was shaking with anger. "Anybody knows it's dangerous as hell to do silly, superstitious things like that—"

I picked up the penny nearer to me and saw it had a dent, as if somebody had hit it hard with a hammer . . .

That was the last jump Hugh made in the States. A week later he was shipped out for Europe. I should have been very happy if I'd known when I said goodbye to him that I'd see him again in two years, that he would be the same Hugh, a little quieter and older, but otherwise untouched.

I gave up the turret room to friends of the tall dark girl from New Jersey. I told Mrs. Allen and Iris goodbye and went home to the desert to work and wait.

Mrs. Allen sent me a Christmas card that year and enclosed a note from Iris. It read: *They is a kindygarten for faith, too. You just swallows the good words and casts your bread on the waters. That was all I meant to teach you. All that fancy stuff was just plumb foolishness, like you said. The strawberry man is my daddy. It was me drawed the pictures with red ink. It was me and my daddy that prayed. Excuse me, but your letter don't make any sense to me. I never put no pennies in your mister's boots. How could I? I thought they went in the river. Please answer, because them pennies are fretting me. Best wishes from Iris.*

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a new story by

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **BARRY PEROWNE**

TITLE: ***Papa Tral's Harvest***

TYPE: Crime and Detection

LOCALES: London and Grenier-en-Haut

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *What a pleasure it is to welcome Barry Perowne back to EQMM! — and with a warm and unusual story that has a simply wonderful non-mystery idea that the entire world should take to its heart.*

WHEN PABLO PICASSO WENT TO live in a small town in Provence, he was invited to turn his attention to a de-consecrated chapel nearby. He proceeded to grace the chapel's interior with a masterpiece of mural art, and to this day the hope of seeing the work and perhaps catching a glimpse of the great painter himself attracts to the town an endless stream of visitors—much to the benefit of the local community.

The mayor of Grenier-en-Haut, a neighboring but smaller town higher up in the hills, viewed these events with a pang of civic envy. He was therefore delighted when, subsequently, a house in Grenier-en-Haut was purchased by none other than Louis Tral, possibly the greatest of Picasso's contemporaries.

There were no de-consecrated chapels in Grenier-en-Haut, but it chanced that the communal granary from which the town derived its name had long been disused, and this municipal "white elephant," a fine specimen of old Provençal architecture, was ideally placed for an artist.

Louis Tral, at this time, was over eighty. In the early days of his career he had been one of a circle of painters who had endured poverty and derision but now were generally recognized as great artists. To most of these friends of his

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youth, fame had come only posthumously; but he himself had survived to enjoy it, and he fully appreciated his good fortune.

With his creative zest seemingly unimpaired by age, he readily accepted the mayor's invitation to turn his attention to the granary, and in a modest ceremony viewed by millions—for the artistic significance of the event caused it to be televised to many countries—he was formally presented with the keys.

In London, on the day of the ceremony at Grenier-en-Haut, it was raining heavily as Henry Chesney hurried home from his work in a large building on the Embankment especially to catch the event on television. A bachelor in his early thirties, he was a painter in his spare time—one of the legion of week-end artists—and he particularly admired the work of Louis Tral.

Letting himself into his flat, Henry Chesney at once switched on the television. He was just in time. As he took off his wet trenchcoat and trilby hat, while the rain beat dismally on his living-room windows, the brilliant sunshine of Grenier-en-Haut faded in on the TV screen. Henry had his first view of the building already referred to, by flippant artists of the younger school, as "Papa Tral's Granary."

It made an immediate and deep impression on Henry Chesney.

With its massive stone walls and roof of weathered tile, the granary backed on a rampart-edged gorge beyond which cypress-dotted hillsides fell away steeply to the distant gleam of the Mediterranean. In the dusty area in front of the building was gathered a crowd of local citizens with a peppering of visiting artists, critics, and dilettantes. From the steps before the ponderous, iron-studded doors, above which hung the flag of France, the mayor was orating. He brandished the granary's archaic keys almost constantly.

Behind the eloquent mayor stood a small group among whom Henry Chesney quickly singled out Louis Tral. The old artist was short, sturdy, gnarled by his early years as a laborer in the olive groves and vineyards of the Midi. While the mayor worked up to his peroration, Tral massaged his furrowed, leathery face with a strong but wrinkled hand. He looked at his feet, contemplated the sky and now and then exchanged an enigmatic glance with a distinguished-looking, silver-haired man who stood on his left, and a slender, sunbrowned, dark-haired girl who stood on his right.

Henry Chesney, who for years had read everything he could lay his hands on about Louis Tral, guessed the identity of both of the artist's companions. The girl, Henry knew, must be Tral's granddaughter, Victorine, and the silver-haired man was undoubtedly Paul Sauvagnac, the bold, foresighted

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dealer—head of the Sauvagnac Galleries in Paris—who almost alone had championed Tral and his circle of fellow artists in the days when they were derided and who for half a lifetime had been Tral's business representative and closest confidant.

Henry Chesney felt he was watching a great moment in the history of art when at last the mayor bestowed the keys on Tral. The old artist said a few awkward words of thanks and would have turned to unlock the doors of the granary, but an excited interviewer armed with a microphone sprang into the breach.

"Monsieur Tral," babbled the interviewer, "have you anything to tell our vast unseen audience as to the project you have conceived for the glorification of this charming old building?"

"Well, it's a granary, is it not?" said Tral. He scratched his cheek, a twinkle in his fine old eyes. "I naturally hope to garner a creditable harvest in it."

"A harvest," beamed the enthusiastic interviewer, "which will make Tral's Granary a rival achievement to Picasso's Chapel?"

"A rival achievement?" Tral removed his beret and gave his bristle of gray hair a rueful rub. "Oh, la-la!" he said. "My old friend Picasso—there's only one of him, *quand même*. Still—" he smiled at the interviewer with almost rustic simplicity—"I shall do my best here for the good of art."

He turned to the granary doors and inserted one of the massive keys in the lock. The mayor, Victorine, and Sauvagnac helped him push the doors open, then stood back. For a moment Tral gazed into the shadowy interior. It seemed to Henry Chesney that the old artist visibly braced himself to face what well might be the last major challenge of his long career—the challenge of the unadorned walls within.

Turning then, Tral beckoned to the crowd, inviting all to enter; and escorted by the mayor and followed by Victorine and Sauvagnac, he walked in slowly through the doorway and thus took formal possession of Tral's Granary.

To Henry Chesney it seemed an unforgettable moment. He drew in a deep breath as the scene at Grenier-en-Haut faded out. He switched off the television set. The London rain still streamed down the windows as he looked round his room. From floor to ceiling its walls were crowded with his own canvases, framed or on stretchers. Frowning, he took pipe and pouch from the pocket of his neat business suit.

A tall man with a keen, clean-shaven face, gray eyes, and blond, wiry hair, he walked slowly round the room, filling his pipe, studying his work—the work of a sparetimer, a week-end artist. Or was there, after all, something more in it than that?

He lighted his pipe, then studied his work with critical intensity. For

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a long time now, he had felt he was approaching a crossroads in his life. He was doing well in his profession. It offered him an assured future. Yet he got no deep satisfaction out of it. He wanted to paint.

But was his work any good? That was the question. Nobody had ever said a kind word for his pictures, let alone bought one. But might that not be a good sign rather than a bad one? Hadn't Van Gogh, Gauguin, Louis Tral, and many others been in the same boat, yet hadn't they let go all other holds and plunged for better or worse into the stormy seas of paint? What had happened inside such men, what revelation must have come to them, to make them so stubbornly certain they were right when the rest of the world so angrily insisted they were wrong?

Henry puffed hard at his pipe. Rain beat at the windows, but he scarcely heard it. Vivid in his mind was the challenge of Tral's Granary, sunlit above the rampart-edged gorge.

"How does a man *know?*" Henry muttered.

He felt that he stood, finally, at the crossroads of his life.

While Henry Chesney stood at his crossroads, Louis Tral, at Grenier-en-Haut, had the workmen in. They prepared the granary walls for his brush, inserted in the ponderous doors a strong wicket door with a modern lock, and in the rear wall built tall windows inaccessible to spies because there the gorge dropped sheer from the windows for over a thousand feet.

His preparations completed, Louis Tral went to work. He locked himself into his granary for an average of eight hours a day. The fact was widely reported, and curiosity about the progress of Tral's mural, stimulated by the television inauguration, brought to Grenier-en-Haut visitors from many lands. Motor coaches soon were regularly making the steep ascent up from Nice or Cannes. The once-neglected little town on the heights enjoyed a bonanza, and the mayor's admiring fellow citizens elected him triumphantly to another term of office.

But the esthetic satisfaction derived by visitors was limited to what they could get from gazing on Tral's Granary strictly from the outside. From the day the great artist started work in it, Tral allowed nobody to set foot inside except Victorine—and Paul Sauvagnac when, from time to time, he showed up from his world-wide travels, bringing works of Tral's which the old artist had loaned for exhibition in the galleries of foreign capitals.

All this was common gossip, and Henry Chesney, on a fortnight's tramping and painting holiday in the hills of Provence, came to Grenier-en-Haut with no expectation whatever of seeing the inside of Tral's Granary. Henry came because he was unable to stay away.

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Three long years had passed since he had seen the granary on television, but it had never ceased to haunt his imagination, and on the next to the last day of his holiday he came trudging into Grenier-en-Haut in the hush of a sun-baked noon.

In spite of his deep tan, dusty brogues, paint-smeared shirt and slacks, two-week's blond beard, and his knapsack, roll of canvases, strapped-up easel, and battered paint box, he still was only a Sunday artist; he still was awaiting an inner revelation to decide his course in life.

Flatly torpid, Grenier-en-Haut ignored his arrival. There was hardly a soul in sight as he trudged down the cobbled main street. The sidewalk trees cast blurs of shade on the dust. From within the cafés, cool and dim under their awnings, sounded the desultory rattle of lunchtime cutlery, the drone of voices, the idle clicking of billiard balls.

There was a queer feeling of fate in Henry as he passed through the town like a noonday pilgrim and followed the rough track, edged by pines and cactus clumps, which led to the rock ledge overlooking the gorge. Then he saw it. Ahead, looming up solid and four-square against the ethereal blue vacancy, was Tral's Granary.

A policeman was pacing slowly to and fro before the steps that led to the ponderous doors.

Henry paused, conscious of a sudden uneasiness. He wiped the sweat from his face with a handkerchief, then walked forward to the dusty area in front of the granary. To the left, against the rampart that rimmed the gorge, a car with Netherlands license plates was parked. Near it, a man and a woman sat on the rampart with a picnic cloth spread between them. They were eating cheese with caraway seeds in it and exchanging backchat with a little girl who wore flaxen pigtails. Evidently their child, she appeared to answer to the name of Gretchen and was hopscotching about as she ate a banana and skylarked with a Schkipperkee puppy.

Except for this family and the policeman, there was nobody about; and Henry Chesney, puzzled to account for the policeman's presence, approached the man courteously.

"Excuse me," said Henry in excellent French. "May I inquire if Monsieur Tral is in good health?"

The policeman stopped pacing. "What is your interest, monsieur?"

"Just that of an interested visitor," said Henry. "Seeing a police officer on duty here, I—well, I feared something might be wrong."

"Wrong?" The policeman seemed not to like the idea. He put his thumbs in his belt, looked Henry up and down, and decided, "I will see your identity papers, if you please."

"Certainly," said Henry, and handed over his passport.

The policeman turned the pages, said abruptly, "*Tiens!*", and gave

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Henry a keen look. "You are here on business, monsieur?"

"No, just on holiday," Henry said. "I do a little painting myself, so I thought I'd like to see Monsieur Tral's granary."

"You are very welcome." His manner now cordial, the policeman returned Henry's passport. "I'm glad to tell you that Monsieur Tral is in good health—and at work, within, this very moment. If I spoke sharply to you, it was because, as you will understand, this granary is a magnet for sightseers." He glanced meaningly toward the Dutch family. "Many have withdrawn to the town for lunch, or you would have found quite a crowd here, all snapping their cameras. I am here to safeguard Monsieur Tral's privacy and keep an eye on visitors. Who knows? Some of them may have ulterior motives. We have had an epidemic of art robberies in France these past few years."

"In England, too," Henry said.

"Everywhere," agreed the policeman. "The Riviera coast, there below, has suffered badly. Thieves seem particularly attracted by the works of masters. One wonders about the motive. Often the pictures stolen are so well known that there would seem to be no hope of disposing of them. Yet they vanish!"

"In London," Henry said, "I've heard it rumored that such pictures find buyers behind the Iron Curtain."

"*Tiens!*" the policeman exclaimed. "Monsieur the Mayor is certainly right, then, to insist that Tral's Granary, so much in the eye of the world, be efficiently guarded day and night." His tone changed. "You see that little red sports car approaching along the track from the town?"

"Yes," said Henry.

"Between ourselves," said the policeman, "Monsieur Tral's granddaughter, Mlle. Victorine, is driving it. You would like to catch a glimpse of Monsieur Tral, perhaps? Mlle. Victorine is coming to fetch him to lunch. He will be emerging in a moment now. If you care to stand over there by the rampart—"

"Thank you," said Henry.

Moving over to the rampart he leaned with his back against it and watched the girl he had seen on television drive her car into the dusty area. She curved the car round, stopped, went into reverse. Apparently she intended to back and turn the car, bringing it alongside the steps so that it would be facing in the direction from which she had come.

Looking round over her shoulder, she sent the car humming backward. She failed to see the Schkipperkee. It sat down full in her way and started scratching itself. Henry dropped his painting gear, made a long-legged leap, and just managed to scoop the puppy from under the wheels.

Gretchen started to screech and bound up and down, her pigtails

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flying. Her startled parents fell off the rampart—though not on the gorge side, fortunately—and Victorine Tral stopped her car with a jerk, jumped out, and taking the Schkipperkee from Henry, cradled it in her arms.

"No harm done, mademoiselle," Henry said, touched by her concern.

"Thank you," she said. She looked up at him, her brown eyes warm with gratitude. "A thousand thanks, monsieur!"

The parents and the policeman arrived simultaneously and there broke out around Henry a polyglot hubbub of inquiries, assurances, and general felicitations, while the wriggling Schkipperkee attempted to lick everyone in reach, and Gretchen redoubled her bounds and screeches—though to no great effect, as none of the self-centered adults paid any attention to her.

Nor did they see the wicket door in the ponderous portals of the granary open and Louis Tral emerge. Locking the door carefully after him, he stood for a moment surveying the commotion, then descended the steps and approached the disturbance.

"What's going on here, Victorine?" he said.

Everybody except the embarrassed Henry Chesney hastened to explain. Tral nodded. In his simple, direct way he took the puppy from Victorine, placed it in the arms of Gretchen, and silenced the child by giving her pigtails a friendly tug.

"Run along, little blonde cabbage," he said. He looked at Henry, glanced at Henry's painting gear lying in the dust, looked back at Henry. "Monsieur, if you have not yet taken lunch, perhaps you will do us the honor?"

Henry said, "I—"

"Good." Tral turned to the policeman. "Goubillon, my old, kindly put monsieur's things in the car."

"At your service, messieurs," said Goubillon, with a salute that made his hand vibrate—and catching Henry's eye he gave him a wink of congratulation.

As for Henry, he could hardly believe his luck as, squeezed beside Tral in the car, with Victorine at the wheel, he rode back in triumph to Grenier-en-Haut.

Turning off the main street, Victorine pulled up presently before a tall old house with faded blue window shutters. While she went to tell someone called Marthe that there would be one extra for lunch, Tral conducted Henry hospitably through a dim cool hall to a terrace speckled with vine shade at the back. Against the terrace parapet, from which great clumps of cactus in rust-red and orange flower dangled above the gorge, stood a table set for lunch with a checkered cloth and horn-handled cutlery.

Tral took up a bottle from the table. "A small apéritif, Monsieur—Monsieur—"

"Henry Chesney," said Henry, as

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he unharnessed himself from his gear and placed it on the flagstones.

Victorine reappeared, smiling, and Tral said, "Come, my dear—a toast to the English artist, Henri Chester."

"To your quick wits, monsieur," said Victorine, raising her glass to Henry, "that rescued the little dog and—" she shuddered—"saved me from nightmares."

"Quite true," said Tral. "Victorine has a weakness for dogs—as the English have, I believe?"

"I'm not well up on dogs myself," Henry said, "though they're used sometimes in my profession."

A woman of housekeeperish appearance, presumably Marthe, came out on to the terrace with a tray of hors d'oeuvres; and Tral, motioning Henry to a chair at the table, asked, "You are not, then, an artist by profession, monsieur?"

Henry hesitated. He glanced toward his roll of canvases, the fruits of his holiday. Already he had resolved to ask Tral to look at them. There was no living painter whose opinion would mean more to him. Instinctively, he knew that on Tral's verdict would depend the course of his future. But this was not the tactful moment to unveil his work. Tral was crunching radishes.

Henry said, "I paint as a pastime —"

"Happy man!" said Tral.

Henry, who had been about to add, "At present," was taken aback, and he said, instead, "You think so, sir?"

Tral did not answer at once. He dipped a radish in salt and looked out thoughtfully over the gorge to the distant blue gleam of the sea. He shrugged.

"Who knows?" he said. "A few are lucky—like me—like my old friend Picasso down yonder. A few of us. But many another, the companions of my youth—names you would know well, Monsieur Chesley—what of them? Gone long ago. Only their works remain. But I am an old man. I remember their lives—and their deaths. H'm? It is the nature of the artist to sow—though he may not always harvest. Sometimes I—"

"Grandpapa," murmured Victorine, with a hint of warning in her voice.

The old man glanced at her as though startled. "So," he said. "Who knows? Who is to say, Monsieur Chesney? *Enfin*, a man does as he must." He ate his radish. "So you are on a painting holiday in these hills of ours?" he asked Henry. "Now, what places have you visited?"

They still were discussing Henry's wanderings when Marthe brought coffee out to the terrace. With growing tension, Henry knew the moment was approaching when he must ask Tral to look at his pictures. He cast about in his mind for the best way to bring up the subject. The palms of his hands felt moist. He

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swallowed and was about to take the plunge when Marthe came out to the terrace again.

"Monsieur Sauvagnac has arrived," she announced.

Tral rose at once, tossing down his napkin. Victorine stood up, too, and Henry had no option but to do the same.

"You will excuse me, Monsieur Cheston?" Tral said. He shook Henry's hand warmly. "Come and see us again sometime. A great pleasure!"

He went into the house, and the bottom fell out of Henry Chesney's world. Victorine obviously was waiting for him to go. There was nothing he could do except gather his gear.

He began to do so, but a thought came to him, a sudden and irresistible temptation. As he slung his knapsack over his shoulder, he stole a glance at Victorine. Her eyes were on the shutters, standing ajar, of a room along the terrace. Her expression was speculative. Henry picked up his strapped-up easel and his paintbox. He left the roll of canvases lying where it was, on the flagstones against the angle of the parapet.

He said, "Thank you very much for the lunch."

She looked at him with a quick smile. "It is I who have to thank you—for saving the dog."

He was in dread that she would notice the roll of canvases, but she did not. She walked with him through the hall to the front door. Outside, beside her small car, was parked an elegant but dusty convertible—presumably belonging to Paul Sauvagnac, Tral's man of business, who had arrived so inopportunely.

"Come and see us again some time, Monsieur Chesney," said Victorine, as they shook hands.

Henry assured her he would.

He walked off up the street rather hurriedly. He half feared that at any moment he would hear Victorine's voice or Marthe's call after him, "Monsieur, you have forgotten something!" He was glad to get safely round the corner and out of earshot.

He made for the café on the main street, where he chose a table well back in the shade of the awning and ordered himself a cognac. He felt slightly ashamed of his duplicity in leaving the canvases behind, but his cause was desperate. He had to be in Nice tomorrow, to fly back to London. After his luck in actually meeting Tral, it was unthinkable that he should return to London without Tral's verdict on those canvases—to settle once and for all, one way or the other, the indecision that plagued his life.

"Damn Sauvagnac!" he thought.

Grenier-en-Haut was coming to life. The sidewalks were no longer vacant. The café tables began to be thronged. He kept a sharp lookout for Victorine's car. She might drive her grandfather back to his work in the granary. Or perhaps Sauvagnac, who also had entrée to the granary, might take Tral back there.

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The afternoon wore on, but Henry saw neither car. He wondered what was happening at Tral's house. Perhaps Tral and Sauvagnac had strolled out on to the terrace by now. Perhaps they had spotted his roll of canvases. An artist and a dealer, could they possibly resist taking a look at them? Perhaps at this very moment they were commenting on his work. With the excitement of artistic discovery? Or with shrugs and grimaces? If only Henry knew!

Restless, he looked at his watch. It was an hour and a half since he had left Tral's house. If he really had forgotten his roll of canvases, he certainly would have discovered the fact by now. He hissed for the waiter, paid for his drinks, and gathered up his gear again.

As he trudged back to Tral's house, he decided he would ask to see Victorine. If necessary, he would confide to her how important it was to him that Louis Tral should look at his work. He had a feeling Victorine would be sympathetic.

But it was Marthe whom he saw. The two cars were still standing in front of the house; and Marthe was coming out as he arrived. She carried a milk jug and seemed to be in a hurry. She listened to him with impatience.

"A roll of canvases, monsieur?" she said. "On the terrace? Perhaps you would care to go through and find them. *Excusez-moi*, I go for milk—the dairy closes in a few minutes."

Henry walked through the dim cool hall, stepped out onto the terrace. There was nobody there. The vine shadows stirred a little over the flagstones; beyond the parapet, the wide view quivered with heat. His roll of canvases was lying where he had left it.

He walked across and picked it up. He felt disappointed, reluctant to go without seeing anybody after all the trouble he had gone to in order to return here. He supposed Victorine must be with her grandfather and Sauvagnac in that room with the partly open shutters along the terrace. He could hear voices from the room.

"Somerset Maugham?" he heard Tral's voice say angrily. "*Why* should Monsieur Maugham have sold his collection, Paul?"

The answering voice was presumably Sauvagnac's. "He told a newspaper interviewer that he was worried by this prolonged epidemic of art robberies. And he's not the only one, Louis. There's Miss Guggenheim, the American collector who lives in Venice—"

"She would dream of selling? Because of the robberies?" Tral's voice sounded dismayed. "But such people as these are true art lovers—collectors of genuine taste and perception. *They* have nothing to fear from us. We wouldn't lay a finger on their collections."

Henry Chesney stood quite still. He was hardly aware of his surroundings, only of the voices.

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Sauvagnac's said, "There are other fingers besides ours at work, Louis. Recently, for example, the London police recovered nearly half a million pounds' worth of stolen art, which included an early Tral, in a Thames-side warehouse. It was thought to be awaiting shipment to behind the Iron Curtain."

"Our man had nothing to do with this?"

"Of course not. It was the work of less skillful thieves. But, as our man complains to me, Louis, the outcry about these art robberies is constantly increasing—and the danger increases proportionately."

"I regret," Tral's voice said, "the concern caused to such collectors as Monsieur Maugham and the American lady in Venice. I didn't foresee this. But we've gone too far now to draw back. My design is laid out—and far advanced. Would you have Tral's Granary a fiasco, Paul?"

"You assured us," another voice put in—it was Victorine's, "that our man was the most brilliant art thief alive. The question is, Paul—is he losing his nerve or does he seek a greater return from us for what he is doing?"

"Exactly," said Tral's voice. "After all, we have made things easy for him. We have worked out the perfect system—simplicity itself. I loan various works of my own—works I prefer not to sell—for inclusion in exhibitions in London, New York, Brussels, or wherever. I put the works in your charge, as my personal representative, and you travel with them to their destination, superintend their hanging, and so forth. This has been our method for half a lifetime. Heads of well-known galleries the world over are perfectly familiar with it."

"Of course, Louis," Sauvagnac's voice said. "But—"

"Elsewhere in the particular city," Tral's voice continued, "perhaps in private ownership, perhaps in the gallery of a Mayfair dealer, a Fifth Avenue dealer, a Boulevard Auguste Reyers dealer, as the case may be, hangs one—or possibly more—of those pictures, *not* from my own brush, which I've listed as essential to my project for turning Tral's Granary significantly to the best interests of art."

Henry Chesney did not move. He hardly breathed. A trickle of sweat ran down his cheek.

"Good," said Tral's voice. "Our man, than—this brilliant thief you knew and recruited to our service—steals the required picture or pictures, Paul, and delivers them to you. Good! In due course the exhibition which includes my own works, on loan, closes. You reframe one or two of the works. Under my own canvas you place the stolen canvas. For half a lifetime you've been traveling the world with Trals. You're a familiar, respected figure to all port and custom authorities concerned with the international traffic in works of art—a man of

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distinction and unquestioned integrity. Have you ever detected the slightest suspicion that during the past three years there have been occasions when you've brought into France, among the Trals you took out, one or sometimes even two extraneous works—non-Trals, in fact?"

"No," Sauvagnac's voice admitted. "I'm not questioning our system, Louis. I—"

"After all, Paul," Victorine's voice interrupted, "our man himself said that his real problem, as a specialist in art robberies, was never the actual theft itself. It was getting a picture out of the country where he'd stolen it—and, still more, finding a buyer for a stolen picture that was very well known."

"We've taken both those problems off his shoulders," said Tral's voice. "And we pay him well enough, *mon Dieu!* For every coup he makes for us, I have to instruct you to sell a Tral, Paul—to pay our man's fee. In all truth, I deplore it if the gradual acquisition of the pictures I require for my project in Tral's Granary has contributed to the worries of such true art connoisseurs as the Englishman, Monsieur Maugham, or the American lady in Venice. But as for these rumors about stolen art works of celebrity being spirited behind the Iron Curtain, surely this is a red herring greatly to our man's advantage? The works we've acquired are perfectly safe in the granary—which, on the insistence of Monsieur the Mayor, is under police guard night and day, though nobody but our three selves, admittedly, has the slightest idea what it is that is being guarded! No, Paul, all things considered, I—"

Henry Chesney, rigid on the terrace, heard a knock sound on the door of the room behind the shutters.

"*Entrez,*" Victorine's voice called. Then: "What is it, Marthe?" she asked.

"The English gentleman," said Marthe's voice, "your luncheon guest—" a tingle of shock passed over Henry Chesney—"is he in here? The agent of police Goubillon is inquiring for him."

"Goubillon?" Victorine's voice said. "For Monsieur Chesney? But he left nearly two hours ago, Marthe."

"He returned just now, mademoiselle," Marthe's voice said. "You requested *café-au-lait* for Monsieur Sauvagnac, you recall. I was hurrying out to get milk before the dairy closed when Monsieur Chesney arrived. He had missed a roll of canvases, thought he had left them on the terrace, so I told him to go through. I thought I heard his voice in here?"

"No, Marthe," Henry heard Victorine say in a strange tone, "he isn't in here."

And he saw the shutters pushed slowly open. Victorine looked out onto the terrace, and she saw him,

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and her brown eyes opened wide. Tral and the silver-haired, distinguished Sauvagnac appeared, one on each side of her. All three of them stood gazing at Henry Chesney.

Tral broke the silence. "Marthe," the old man said heavily, "Monsieur Chesney *is* on the terrace. Tell Goubillon to come through."

Henry swallowed with a dry throat. He held out the roll of canvases.

"I came back for these," he said.

None of the three answered. They went on gazing at him. Footsteps sounded in the hall. Marthe and the policeman came out to the terrace.

"The English gentleman," said Marthe, and withdrew.

Goubillon saluted Henry smartly. "A message for you, monsieur—from Monsieur the Mayor. He passed by the granary shortly after the imperiling of the little dog. I told him of the incident, and he said, if I should see you again when I came off duty, to give you a message. As you went to lunch with Monsieur Tral, I thought you might still be here. The message, monsieur, is: Will you take an apéritif with Monsieur the Mayor at seven this evening in his parlor adjoining the *hotel-de-ville?*"

"That's—very kind of Monsieur the Mayor," Henry said mechanically.

"Not at all, monsieur," said the policeman. "Monsieur the Mayor told me he would be disappointed if he missed meeting a visitor to Grenier-en-Haut who was not only a lover of art but also, as I noted when I examined your passport, an officer of the famed Criminal Investigation Department of Scotland Yard." He stepped back a pace, smartly. "Seven o'clock, monsieur. *Merci bien!*"

He saluted, turned, and marched back through the hall.

Henry looked down at the roll of canvases he held. He had made use of them to provide himself with an excuse for coming back to this house. As a result, he had stumbled on a discovery—and was now faced with a duty. It was plain, inescapable, and it would make his name, lift him many rungs up the ladder of success in his profession.

Yet a black cloud weighed on his spirits. He had to force himself to look at the three people standing there at the window along the terrace.

They had not moved. The shock of realizing that he must have overheard, followed by the greater shock of learning what he was, seemed to have paralyzed them. He felt a sudden surge of anger.

"*Why?*" he said. "In heaven's name, Monsieur Tral—*why* these thefts?"

The old man did not answer, but Victorine, her eyes fixed steadily on Henry, said, "Grandpapa, give me your keys." She took them from him and walked out to the terrace.

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"Come, Monsieur Chesney," she said. "See for yourself."

As though confident that he would follow, she went into the hall. Henry hesitated, glancing at Tral and Sauvagnac, then abruptly walked after Victorine through the hall to the front door. She was getting into her small red car. He got in beside her.

Neither of them spoke during the brief drive to Tral's Granary. It stood out four-square and solid on its rock ledge against the wide sky growing tinted and luminous with sunset. The Dutch family was gone, but a few sightseers still were about. They watched curiously as Victorine, to a salute and a smile from the policeman on duty, walked quickly up the steps, followed by Henry Chesney with his knapsack and painting gear, his roll of canvases under his arm.

Victorine unlocked the wicket door, stepped inside, and held the door open for Henry to enter. Her face was pale under its tan, her lips were compressed, her brown eyes smoldered. She closed the door with a snap of its strong lock.

"Wait here," she said. "I'll open the shutters."

Deep twilight filled the granary except at the far end where the slats of four tall window shutters were edged with light. He heard her quick footsteps receding, hollowly echoing. He set down his things on the stone floor. Dimly he made out tall trestles, with a plank across them, standing against the wall to his left. Framed canvases of various sizes leaned against the trestles. He smelt paint, sizing, turpentine.

The clang of shutter bars echoed through the granary. One by one, Victorine drew open the shutters of the high windows overlooking the gorge. The glow of sunset filled Tral's Granary.

Victorine turned, silhouetted against the windows. Henry heard her clear voice.

"My grandfather's mural begins just to your right, Monsieur Chesney." She came toward him down the length of the granary. "As you see, it's been painted on the walls all around the framed canvases of other artists—pictures you will no doubt recognize, by men whose names will be familiar to you. My grandfather was young in a time now recognized to have been a great period in modern art. He has painted his memories of the friends of his youth—of their lives, of the circumstances in which he remembers their painting the particular works you see hanging here—of the deaths of these friends of his, monsieur, and something of the subsequent history of these works they left behind them. He is an old man—with a long memory. See! Begin here. This artist at his easel—you will know him, perhaps, from the picture which you see he is painting?"

"Yes," Henry murmured.

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"A poor room in which he works, is it not, monsieur?" said Victorine. "Could any man have less? Ah, but he had his picture! See, here is the actual picture—hanging here, framed. A famous picture today, is it not? You notice the typewritten card attached to the frame. I typed it. It shows the sum for which the artist sold this now celebrated work. My grandfather clearly remembers the transaction. It brought the artist enough to buy canvas for several more pictures—also a pair of boots he needed desperately.

"But look, now, at this scene in the mural. Here is the same picture displayed in a famous London auction establishment. How chic, the ladies and gentlemen, are they not? One notes the date of this auction from the newspaper headline which my grandfather has painted with photographic exactitude into the scene. Seven years ago, this auction! And you notice the sum mentioned in this headline—the great sum, the fabulous sum which the picture brought at this auction?"

She looked up challengingly at Henry.

"What would the artist have said, Monsieur Chesney—had he known?" She shrugged. "He never did. He had been dead for many years. We see that from the calendar hanging crooked on the bare wall of the room in this next scene, which shows the artist's last hour. Still the same room. But he *has* got less, after all! See, the bed is gone—the mattress he's lying on is now on the floor. Ah, but he still has the boots—rather the worse for wear, it is true, but here they stand, in the very middle of the floor."

She gripped Henry's wrist.

"Let us move on, Monsieur Chesney," she said. "There is much to see. My grandfather's mural is far advanced—the lives of his friends, the stories of their pictures. Or, rather, of the particular pictures which hang in this granary—these *stolen* pictures!"

Together, slowly, they moved on around the granary filled with the sunset. Victorine now was silent. Once or twice she glanced up at Henry, but she said nothing. Louis Tral's mural, painted around the stolen pictures, spoke for itself.

At last they reached the trestles with the plank across them.

"This is as far as grandfather's work has gone," said Victorine. "This is what he's working on at present. He *had* hoped to—acquire the remaining pictures on his list, the pictures whose fates he's followed for many, many years, during the next year or two, and so be able to complete his work."

"And then?" Henry said in a low voice.

"Monsieur," she said, "my grandfather was begged to make use of this granary for the good of art. Was Monsieur the Mayor really thinking about the good of art when he gave the invitation? No, monsieur! And many of the worldly

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people shown in these auction scenes —are they motivated by the love of art? Or by *other* motives, such as the acquisition of status symbols, devices for tax reliefs, means to make capital gains? Oh, many other motives! And the larger and larger sums for which these pictures have changed hands through the years—*does the artist benefit by them?* Does any descendant or connection of his? Does art *itself* benefit?"

She waved a hand at the walls of Tral's Granary, filled with the glow from the tall windows above the gorge.

"This work, Monsieur Cheney," she said. "It is certainly my grandfather's last. It is his manifesto. It has been agreed by Monsieur the Mayor that Tral's Granary shall not be opened or entered by anybody, that it shall remain under police guard until six months, to the day, after my grandfather's death. Monsieur, did you by any chance see on television the occasion when Monsieur the Mayor handed my grandfather the keys of this granary?"

"I saw it," Henry said. His heart thumped.

"Is it not certain," said Victorine, "that Monsieur the Mayor will arrange for the day he *opens* Tral's Granary to be an even greater occasion? Is it not certain that the discovery of the missing masterpieces will make the headlines of every newspaper in the world—and so launch my grandfather's crusade?"

"His crusade?" Henry said.

"The artists who painted these pictures," said Victorine. "They sowed but they did not reap. My grandfather has garnered the harvest for them, and stored it here in Tral's Granary—for the sustenance, he hopes, of young artists today and in the future. My grandfather has set out his hopes in a document which will be found here on the day the granary is opened. Quite simply, my grandfather desires a tax."

"A tax?" Henry exclaimed.

Victorine's eyes shone.

"It is only justice," she said. "A tax, monsieur! In all countries! A simple tax, payable every time a picture changes hands at auction—a tax to be levied on the difference between the sum of the successful bid and the sum proved to have been received by the artist who originally created the picture! The proceeds of this tax to be used solely for the support and encouragement of struggling young artists in all lands today!"

Henry Chesney looked at her. He looked round at the walls of the granary. He looked at his own gear, and his roll of canvases, lying on the stone floor. Then slowly he took from his pocket a mica-faced case containing a blue card and looked at the card thoughtfully.

"What is that, monsieur?" Victorine asked, puzzled.

"An identification card," Henry said. "My professional identification."

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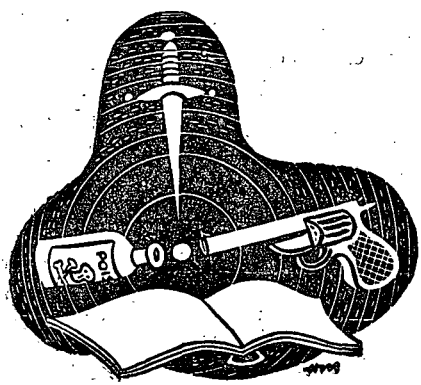
"Your profession," she said slowly. "I—for a moment, I had forgotten that."

He saw the light go out of her eyes. And knew now, after all the years he had wasted marking time at the inescapable crossroads in his life, that there really was only one way for him. It was no easy way, as the painted walls showed. But, as Louis Tral had said, a man did as he must, come what might—and as he looked at Victorine, Henry Chesney hoped that he might not, after all, have to walk his way alone.

He smiled at her—and tore up his identification card.

Meanwhile, outside the tall windows, the light was fading over the gorge. Along the coastline far below, the Riviera resorts were beginning their nightly glitter. In front of the iron-studded doors of Tral's Granary on the rock ledge, the vigilant policeman paced slowly to and fro.



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WORKING IS FOR FOOLS

(a story in play form)

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

Cast

SHERMAN . . . . . *an American jewel thief*
MANON . . . . . *a petite Parisienne*
FOWLER . . . . . *a man in plain clothes*

and

Hotel porter, train conductor,
ship's steward, passengers,
purser, First Officer, etc.

SHERMAN: She worked in a little jewelry store near the Rue de la Paix. I "worked" all Paris, but in a different sense of the word. Picking up money here and there, this way and that—in any way except working for it. Working is for fools.

Manon was her name. She was brunette and petite, like so many French girls. Vivacious and full of life, like so many French girls. And ready to fall in love heart and soul, always providing the right man came her way—like all French girls.

I first met her when I went into the little jewelry store to ask about a cigarette case they had in the window. I wasn't interested in the case, and I wasn't interested in her—I was interested in "casing" the place. Jewelry stores are my metier, or as they say it in English, my meat. I came back another time, and we talked some more about the cigarette case. And then another time after that. After a while the cigarette case dropped out of it entirely. I never did get around to buying it.

By now she was in love with me, and I was—well, letting her be. I started picking her up every night, after the store closed. We'd buy a bottle of red wine and one of those thin loaves of bread as long as an umbrella, and it was all very boy-and-girlish. It was *l'amour, la vie parisienne;* only, her rival, the jewelry store, was still way out in front.

Finally I saw what I wanted. I knew that if I kept calling for her long enough I'd see something that would be of special interest. Pearls. Not just pearls—but what

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pearls! I got her to take them out of the showcase when her boss wasn't looking. She even held them up around her own neck to let me see how they looked. I handled them a bit myself, just enough to get the feel of them. My eyes are quick and my fingers are smart. If they weren't, I might just as well go to work. My fingers told me their size and shape, my eyes told me their color and how many of them there were on the string. That was all I needed.

The dummy set, the duplicates, didn't have to be an exact imitation—just as long as they fooled you at a quick glance on their way to or from the safe where they were kept overnight. That was enough. A friend of mine made the false ones for me. I carried them unwrapped in a side pocket of my jacket. I got her to take the originals out of the case for one last showing. I must have jarred her elbow clumsily without realizing it, because they dropped to the carpet—on my side of the case. I stooped and picked them up for her—after an awkward moment of fumbling. She hurriedly put them back inside the case, with a nervous glance at her boss' office door. I walked out of there with an unwrapped string of pearls still in my pocket, just the way I'd come in. But they'd gone up in value considerably The difference was about fifty thousand—and I don't mean francs. I mean dollars.

And then, while I was waiting for the hotel porter to come up and get this big wardrobe trunk of mine, so it could be put on the boat train and I could get the devil out of Paris, but fast, before they opened up that safe in the little jewelry store next morning, someone knocked on the door . . .

SHERMAN: *Entrez.* It's about time you got here! I have to make the Gare du Nord in less than three-quarters of an hour. How am I going to do it with all that traffic out there? (*door opens*) Manon!

MANON: (*dangerously quiet at first*) *Bien sur.* (*then volubly angry*): This is a fine thing you do to me, yes? I stand there like a fool for two hours, waiting. What you think I am anyway, that you can do this to me? You think I am an ingenue, a beginner? That I must stand on the street corner like a little lost dog, wagging my tail for you to come?

SHERMAN: (*still not over his dismay*) How'd you know where to find me?

MANON: (*laughing bitterly*) Me, I am no fool either when it comes to men. Two can play the same game, no? You come to my door with me many times, no? Maybe one time I follow you back, yes? *Et voila!* You are not going to

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throw me over like an old glove when you have finished with it. It is not that easy. What is mine I keep, whether it is a man or a bus ticket.

SHERMAN: What're you getting so excited about? Pipe down.

MANON: *Evidamment.* No, I should remain calm, *tranquille.* So you have to make the Gare du Nord in three-quarters of an hour. And who is she, the one you go away with? Where is she, the one who takes you from me? Maybe you think I don't see your trunk standing open there in the middle of the room?

SHERMAN: It's too big for the closet, that's the only reason it's in the room.

MANON: (*beginning to sob*) Lies! All lies! You are packing. You are going away.

SHERMAN: (*viciously*) Come in here and shut up! What're you trying to do, rouse the whole hotel? (*door slams as he pulls her roughly inside; then dropping his voice, he tries to reason with her*) Now listen, Manon, be sensible, will you? There's no other girl and I'm not going anywhere. Here, take my handkerchief and dry your eyes—(*she gives a slight scream*) What is it? What are you staring at?

MANON: (*drawing in her breath, deathly frightened*) On the floor—I see them fall, when you take out your handkerchief—

SHERMAN: (*as he snatches them up*) Keep your hands off! Get away from 'em!

MANON: No, let me have—! I know what they are! The pearls from the store! You have stolen them!

SHERMAN: Shut up, damn you! Keep your voice down. One more peep out of you and—

MANON: (*her voice rising uncontrollably*) *Voleur! Miserable!* So that is why you make love to me—to steal from my employer! He think I do it! He blame me! I call the police right now!

SHERMAN: Stay away from that door!

MANON: Let me out of here or I scream!

SHERMAN: All right, you want 'em so bad, here they are—right around your neck. Now let's hear you scream. Go ahead. Let's hear you. (*sound of strangled coughing, then a muffled impact, as when a body falls*)

SHERMAN: (*slowly letting out his breath*) Dead. My God, she's dead. (*bending down, whispering*) Manon. Manon . . . This is it, all right. If I never knew what trouble was before, I sure know now. No place to put her. The closet, under the bed—they'll find her in no time after I leave and have a pick-up waiting for me when the train gets to Le Havre . . . Damn pearls, they've cut into her throat so tight I can't get 'em off! (*knock on door*)

PORTER: (*off*) *Les bagages sont prêt, m'sieu?*

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SHERMAN: *Pas encore. Attendez un tout petit moment.* Hold it just one second. I'll be right with you.

PORTER: *Mais si m'sieu ne se dêpeche pas, il va manquer son train.*

SHERMAN: No, I'll make the train, all right. If it's the last thing I do I'll make the train. (*in a lower voice, to himself*) I've got to—now. (*creak, as he swings the trunk open wider; ripping sound, as he pulls out the thin lath partitions*) She'll make it if I fold her legs up. Stay up, will you? (*creak, as he brings both halves of the trunk together again; thud, as he forces them closed; clicks, as he fastens the hardware*)

SHERMAN: (*opening room door*) Come in and get the trunk—it's ready and waiting. (*squeak of wheels as hand truck rolls in; thump as trunk is hoisted onto it*)

PORTER: Is heavy, no, m'sieu?

SHERMAN: Is heavy yes, m'sieu. (*squeak of wheels going out*) Whe—ew! An ocean voyage for two, one on the outside, one on the inside. (*door slams shut, as he hastily leaves room*)

(*Train starter's voice, off*) *En voiture!* (*A shrill whistle, then train wheels start to click*)

SHERMAN: It goes in the compartment with me, whether you like it or not!

CONDUCTOR: *Quelle betise! Ça ne se permet pas! C'est seulement vous, les fols americains, qui—*

SHERMAN: Never mind about the crazy Americans. It's in already, isn't it? So if you want it out again, you can tackle it by yourself.

CONDUCTOR: (*warningly*) You pay extra charges for to do this, you wait and see! *Cela va coûter bien cher.*

SHERMAN: All right, so I'll pay extra charges. Who's arguing about that? I'll even buy an extra ticket, if that'll satisfy you. Here, take it out of this.

CONDUCTOR: *Bon.* (*compartment door closes, as conductor goes out grumbling; trunk gives an additional thump, as Sherman relocates it; sound of a newspaper crackling, as other occupant of compartment puts it away*)

FOWLER: Watch my legs, please.

SHERMAN: Watch 'em yourself. Slide 'em over, that's all you have to do. It ain't near you.

FOWLER: I paid for a first-class seat, with floor room to go with it. That thing's supposed to stay out in the corridor. In fact, it's not supposed to be in a passenger car at all—it's supposed to be up front in the baggage car.

SHERMAN: D'you own the railway?

FOWLER: What's in it that's so important anyway?

SHERMAN: The Eiffel Tower, of course.

FOWLER: And you ain't kidding, only it happens to be fastened down—that's the only reason it's still there. I had you spotted thirty seconds after you showed

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up in this compartment. I can smell one of you guys a mile away.

SHERMAN: And I can smell one of *you* guys *two* miles away. I had *you* spotted forty seconds after I showed up in this compartment. The extra ten seconds it took me was because you had a newspaper over your puss.

FOWLER: Let me give you a little rundown—see if I'm not right. As soon as we clear Le Havre you'll drum up a little game—a friendly little game for nickels and dimes, just to make it interesting. The first night you'll lose—just a little bit. The second night the suckers'll lose—just a little bit. That's so they'll come back again the third night, to try to make it up. But the last night out, the night before the ship docks in New York, that's when you'll make your killing. And the next morning you'll be mighty hard to find—they'll look high and low for you, but they won't find a trace, not even a smell of you. (*Long pause, while they size each other up*)

SHERMAN: (*finally*) Wise guy.

FOWLER: Wise to you anyway, Mr. Con Man.

SHERMAN: And I'm wise to you, Mr. Plainclothes Cop.

(*cabin door opens*)

STEWARD: Yes, but there's another gentleman going to share this cabin with you.

SHERMAN: Look, am I going to have trouble with you too? First the taxi driver on the way to the train, then the train conductor on the way down, and now you. This trunk goes right in here along with me. And it stays in. Clear? Clear!

STEWARD: Yes, but that's what we've got the hold for, sir. Don't you see, if the ship rolls, it's liable to injure someone in here, either yourself or the other party.

SHERMAN: Then clear him out of here—put him in another cabin. I asked for a cabin by myself anyway.

STEWARD: I don't book the cabins, sir. They do that at the company's Paris office.

SHERMAN: All right, blow. You heard me. It's in and it stays in.

VOICE: (*off, as steward is leaving*) I'm looking for 42-A.

STEWARD: (*off*) Right in there, sir—where you see that door open. (*footsteps enter, stop short*)

FOWLER: What do you know? Small world, isn't it? Looks like we're going to be buddies.

SHERMAN: Buddies we won't be! I may have to be holed up in here with you, but—

FOWLER: You've been in jail before.

SHERMAN: Now let's get one thing straight. I don't have to take any guff from you, cop or no cop. We're on the high seas, and you don't have any jurisdiction out here. You can't do a blasted thing to me.

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FOWLER: Funny how they always know their rights, these crooks.

SHERMAN: You got any evidence that I've stolen anything?

FOWLER: I will have. Give me time.

SHERMAN: Either put up or shut up. And don't call me a crook until you do have.

FOWLER: Still got it with you, I see.

SHERMAN: You see real good.

FOWLER: Sure must be smoking-hot.

SHERMAN: Yeah. I use it to cook hot dogs on.

FOWLER: (*thumps his hand against trunk*) Just wanted to see if you'd jump or not.

SHERMAN: Quit leaning against it.

FOWLER: What's the matter, can't I rest an elbow while I'm smoking a cigarette?

SHERMAN: Not against my property.

FOWLER: Your problem, is what you mean.

WOMAN: Thank you very much. I had that stateroom coming over the last time, and I'm very fond of it. I was very comfortable in it.

PURSER: I'll see that your things are taken up right after dinner, madam.

WOMAN: Thank you, you're very kind. That's why I always love to cross on one of your ships.

PURSER: Our pleasure, madam.

SHERMAN: Are you the purser?

PURSER: Yes, sir. What can I do for you?

SHERMAN: I'd like to change my stateroom. I'm in 42-A, and—

PURSER: I'm sorry, I'm afraid I can't do anything for you. There isn't a vacant stateroom on the ship. We're booked solid.

SHERMAN: You moved that woman, the one just ahead of me, didn't you? What about that?

PURSER: That was different. There was a last-minute cancellation from Paris, and she wanted this particular stateroom in the first place, but couldn't get it at the time.

SHERMAN: So what about the one she's moving out of? Why not put me in there?

PURSER: But you don't understand, sir. She was sharing that with another lady. The other lady is still staying in it.

SHERMAN: You've got it all covered up real nice, haven't you? All worked out. Who do you think you're kidding? Don't you suppose I know he came out here and flashed his badge at you, to make sure I couldn't get my stateroom changed?

PURSER: Flashed his badge? You mean the other gentleman in 42-A with you? We don't work that way on this ship. With us, it's first come, first served. In fact, I had no idea he was a police officer.

SHERMAN: You wouldn't have. You've got to be in the know for that.

(*door opening, then closing*)

FOWLER: Didn't work, did it?

SHERMAN: What didn't work?

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FOWLER: Trying to switch staterooms.

SHERMAN: You ought to know, you were the one who queered it.

FOWLER: Maybe you give me more credit than I deserve. And then again maybe you're right.

SHERMAN: How about getting a little fresh air in here?

FOWLER: Since when are you a fresh air fiend?

SHERMAN: Don't have to be a fresh air fiend, for Christmas' sake. You've got the porthole closed up, the fan turned off—what're you afraid of letting a little ventilation in here for? (*porthole opens, fan begins whirring*) It's stale in here.

FOWLER: Sure it's stale in here. I noticed that long ago. I just wanted to see if you noticed it too.

SHERMAN: Anybody'd notice it.

FOWLER: But would their face turn green? Would it frighten them—*the way it does you?*

SHERMAN: (*no answer*)

FOWLER: Noth ng to say, eh? (*gong sounds*) You sure jumped that time. That's the first call for dinner. They carry a gong around the deck and take a whack at it every so often. Didn't you ever hear that before?

SHERMAN: I wasn't expecting it.

FOWLER: (*with fake consideration*) I know how it is when your nerves are all shot . . . May as well start getting ready, I guess. (*drops one shoe*) Now we'll play the usual game. You trying to take all the time you can, so you'll be sure to outlast me, and not leave until after I do. And then gulp your food and beat it back here before I do. All so I don't get a crack at your precious trunk.

SHERMAN: Got it all figured, haven't you?

FOWLER: I haven't got it figured. It figures itself. (*gong sounds again, farther off*) Incidentally, it's none of my business, but isn't it about time you put on a clean shirt?

SHERMAN: You said it first. It's none of your business.

FOWLER: You haven't changed it since you've been on the ship. Mean to say that's the only one you brought with you? It's starting to look pretty shabby for a first-class dining room. Why don't you get a pare one out of your trunk?

SHERMAN: That's it, huh? You *wish!*

FOWLER: Suit yourself. Just to make it two out of three times, it's none of my business. *I* don't have to sit next to you at the table.

SHERMAN: (*with sudden alertness*) What's that you've got in your hand?

FOWLER: Bottle of liquid shoe polish. What did you think it was, a rod? I always carry this kind along with me. If you put 'em outside the door, the stewards use that wax kind which makes 'em sticky as molasses.

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SHERMAN: Keep it away from my trunk! (*impact of small bottle falling to floor and rolling, but without breaking*) Now look what you did! I ought to haul off and hang one on you! All over my shirt!

FOWLER: You were the one who did it, not me. You pushed my arm up. (*chuckling*) Are you going to report me to the steward, is that what you're ringing the bell for?—

SHERMAN: Shut up! Shut up while you're still able to!

FOWLER: Easy enough fixed. Why blow your top about it? All you got to do is take a clean shirt out of your trunk.

SHERMAN: So that was the game, huh? Well, watch where it gets you!

STEWARD: (*off, behind closed door*) Did you ring, sir?

SHERMAN: I'll have my meal in here.

STEWARD: (*off*) Very good, sir. What would you—?

SHERMAN: (*impatiently*) Anything at all!

FOWLER: (*mockingly*) As they say in France, *bon appetit!* (*door opens, closes again, as he goes out*)

SHERMAN: (*door opens*) Back already? Sure didn't take long to eat this time, did you? Talk about me.

FOWLER: I didn't begin yet. I came back because I forgot something.

SHERMAN: You're a liar. You didn't come back because you forgot something. You came back because you hoped you'd catch me with the trunk open.

FOWLER: You know all the answers.

SHERMAN: You're not very smart, though. Wouldn't I lock the door to keep you out, if I'm going to take a dive into the trunk?

FOWLER: (*contemptuously*) How long would it take me to kick it in? (*thumps the panel with his knuckle to show how thin it is*) What were you doing over there with one shoulder halfway out the porthole? Seasick? Or measuring it for size? Too bad they make 'em so small, isn't it? (*pause*) Your face looks green again—this time even with the porthole open. Maybe the trunk was the wrong place to have the steward set down your dinner tray. *I* wouldn't like to eat off the top of a trunk, myself. (*terrific clash and clatter as Sherman, goaded now beyond endurance, flings the tray and everything on it at him*)

FOWLER: (*laughing uproariously*) Shame to waste good food like that.

(*sound of six bells striking*)

SHERMAN: (*narrating in a half-whispered voice*) Six bells. That's seatime for three o'clock. The stateroom is dark. We've both been in our bunks since midnight, him and me. He seems to be asleep. I can hear his steady, heavy breathing all the way over here. Of course you can be fooled that way, too, but I don't think he

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could keep it up that long—three hours—if it wasn't the McCoy. Anyway, I've got to take the chance. It's got to be now or never. It can't wait another night. The stateroom already has a peculiar odor to it—in spite of the fan, in spite of the open porthole. By tomorrow the steward will notice it, if he hasn't already. I'll have to take it—her—out through the stateroom door, along the passage, up the stairs, and to the deck above. And over. (*groans*) And all because the porthole is too small.

And it's got to be tonight—the longer I think about it, the worse it'll be. I'll wrap her in this blanket from the bunk. Spread it here on the floor first, so it'll be ready. Now the trunk—(*tinkle of keys; then the snap of the trunk lock; then a grinding sound as the two halves swing apart; Sherman makes a gagging sound; Fowler coughs two or three times in his sleep, then breathes regularly again*)

SHERMAN: (*in the same half-whispered voice as he opens corridor door softly*) I've seen deliverymen, when they're delivering carpeting or linoleum, carry it like this. Hold it pointed the long way, in the direction you're going, with your grip around the middle. She isn't much thicker, at that. Now down this passageway . . . I've made it this far, but here comes the ticklish part.

(*footsteps descending staircase*)

SHERMAN: Somebody coming down! And I'm cut off—too far from the stateroom door to get back in time. Caught out here in the open, halfway between. Wait, this door here! (*sound of door opening swiftly, then shutting again; voices fading in*)

WOMAN: I love nothing better than a good brisk walk around the deck at night, but I had no idea it was so late.

MAN: That's the way the time goes when the company's agreeable.

WOMAN: Good heavens, what's that?

MAN: Must be that door we just passed.

WOMAN: Imagine leaving doors open at this time of night . . . (*voices fading off*) (*door opening stealthily, then Sherman's footsteps continuing cautiously down the passage*)

SHERMAN: Now the stairs. Just this one last stretch, and I'm in the clear. (*another door opens, then the rhythmic sound of the sea*) Deck dark, not a soul around. Just set her down in this deck chair a minute, so I can get my breath back.

(*footsteps on deck*)

FOWLER: So the trunk finally gave up its secret? (*Sherman utters a startled, high-pitched exclamation almost like a woman's scream*) Yeah, right behind you every step of the way. But you didn't look back enough, you kept looking ahead too much. (*chuckles*) All

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that trip for nothing. Now, stand clear and let's take a look at whatever you've piled up on that deck chair. I couldn't make out what it was in the dark down there when you first took it out, and I wanted to give you plenty of rope to hang yourself—

SHERMAN: (*almost whimpering*) No-o! No-o!

FOWLER: (*savagely*) Stand clear, I said! I've got a gun here that warns you to do what I tell you.

SHERMAN: You better not look in that blanket.

FOWLER: You bet your sweet life you'd like me not to, wouldn't you? But this is the payoff right here and now. The old payola. The end of the line . . .

SHERMAN: (*narrating*) He had to part the blanket with one hand, so he could hold the gun on me with the other. He did it at the top. He must have been looking right square at her face—or what had been her face. He gave a jolt, then a whinny of fright, like a rearing horse when it sees a Jack o' Lantern on Halloween. The gun went way off center. I gave him a right into the side of his head that sent him skittering across the deck and up against the rail. The tilt of the ship helped too. I dove low for his legs in a flying tackle, just heaved them up and over. The gun went off straight into the sky above (*crack of a revolver*) and he went down the other way, with a death cry that the wind stretched out like the tail of a kite.

(*long-drawn scream, fading*)

But it was too late to go back and get her. I couldn't get there in time. The long row of lights in the deck ceiling flashed on, as far as the eye could reach, and people came crowding out of the lounge door. The First Officer, and a couple of members of the crew, and a lot of passengers right behind them. They spotted me right away. I just stood there—there was no place for me to go, anyway. Only over, after him. Too many lights, too many people all around me, and all at once. I'd lost the game. In the last two minutes of it. Well, many a game is lost in its last two minutes.

(*hubbub of voices*)

Then a woman passenger came up, the one who had passed me in the passageway a few minutes before. She was half hysterical, and a stewardess had to help hold her up.

WOMAN: I saw the body go by my porthole as it fell! It went right by, almost close enough to touch. It was dark out there, but I had the lights on, and the light struck it for a moment as it went by.

FIRST OFFICER: Could you tell who it was?

WOMAN: (*shuddering*) No! Oh, no!

FIRST OFFICER: Check on his roommate. If he doesn't turn up, that's who it was.

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SHERMAN: (*narrating again*) He went over and took a look at what was on the deck chair. When he came back, his face was white. He said—

FIRST OFFICER: I've been sailing the seas twenty-seven years, and this is about the worst I've ever—stay down at the other end of the deck, you people. Bring some canvas, you two, and remove—what you see over there on that chair. (*to Sherman, in a lowered voice*) Who was she?

SHERMAN: Someone I killed back in Paris.

FIRST OFFICER: You brought her with you all this way?

SHERMAN: I had to. I was stuck with her. This cop fastened on me, and I couldn't shake him. He was even down there in the stateroom with me the last three days.

FIRST OFFICER: Cop? What cop?

SHERMAN: The one I just tossed over.

FIRST OFFICER: That was no cop. That guy was wanted by the cops himself. He was a blackmailer. His specialty was impersonating cops, and shaking people down on ships and trains whenever he caught on to something they had to hide. It wasn't you we were after, when we came out on the double just now—it was him. We'd found the stateroom empty a moment before. The radio operator had just received a message asking us to put him under arrest and hold him until the ship gets in to New York.

If you'd have waited just ten minutes more, just sat tight and been patient ten minutes more, we'd have taken him off your neck. You wouldn't have had to commit the second murder, and probably the first one would never have been found out. Hold out your hands.

(*click of handcuffs*)

This way. Come with us. And don't give any trouble.

(*footsteps moving away along deck*)

SHERMAN: Well, that's it—the story of me and my wardrobe trunk. One thing's for sure: no matter how many murders they hook you for, you can only die for one of them. But one is enough, isn't it? In fact, one is one too many . . .

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Do you believe in ghosts? Of course not! In this ultra-scientific day? Ridiculous! Just a superstition left over from the dark ages. Then you really have nothing to be afraid of . . . have you?

GHOST IN THE HOUSE

by GEORGE SUMNER ALBEE

"WANT A BEER, DARLING?" asked Henry Decker, home from the office at 5:30, now comfortable in slacks and a pale-blue polo shirt. "Or a martini?"

"A martini," said Deborah firmly. "Henry, I don't know how to tell you this—but there was a ghost in the house this afternoon!"

Henry stirred the cocktails in the monogrammed pitcher she had bought for their fourth anniversary, and they went out onto the screened porch that overlooked their small but trim back yard.

"That darned grass is four inches tall," observed Henry. "I'd swear I mowed it only a couple of days ago. Tell me about your ghost."

"It isn't a bit funny. It scared me out of my wits," said Deborah from her aluminum chaise. She smoothed her candy-striped summer skirt. "I thought I heard someone in the living room, so I went in, and there it was."

"In broad daylight?"

"Broad daylight. It was a pudgy little man, about forty, in a chocolate-brown suit with a pin stripe, a tan shirt, and a dark red tie. His shoes looked as if they'd just been polished. He had a brown hat with a narrow brim, shoved back on his head, and there was perspiration on his upper lip."

"I never knew that ghosts perspired," said Henry, with a chuckle. "Who was it?"

"I'm not joking!"

"Oh, come on, darling. But how did he get in? I told you to always keep the front door locked."

"I don't know how he got in. He was twirling a key around one finger, on one of those chains made of tiny silver balls—I suppose he got in with that. He took out a notebook and began to make notes in it, and I said, 'I beg your pardon,' and he paid no attention to me. I asked him who he was, but he just went on writing, and then he started down the hall to the bedrooms. 'Hey, where do you think you're going?' I said to him. And then"—Deborah faltered—"I reached out to take hold of his arm, and my—my hand went right *through* him."

"You're serious, aren't you?" Surprised, Henry put down his cocktail glass on the yellow plastic top of the aluminum porch table.

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"You must have a fever. Maybe you have this one-day virus everybody is catching."

"I took my temperature, and I feel fine," Deborah said impatiently. "But there *was* a ghost in the house this afternoon, at exactly twenty minutes past three. I saw him just as plainly as I see you right now."

"I can see you're upset, and I don't blame you a bit," said Henry. "All right, the thing to do is to look at it scientifically. First, we have to assume it was a real man. He could have been any number of things—an appraiser, an inspector from the Fire Department who got the wrong address and happened to have a passkey that opened our door. Those guys do have passkeys, you know. He didn't hear you because he was so wrapped up in what he was doing. Or maybe he was sent out to repossess somebody's furniture, and he thought you were the owner and was trying to get in and out of the house without having you scratch his face with your nails or throw a vase at him. That would explain his pretending not to listen to you."

"It doesn't explain my hand going through him. You don't understand. I stuck my arm in front of him—as if it were a fence, or a gate—and he walked straight through it. My hand went in at his chest and came out through his back as if he were a soap bubble."

"You were excited and upset, darling, so it just seemed that way to you," Henry reassured her. "It was a hallucination, Deb. Even normal, healthy people have hallucinations sometimes. I must have told you about the time I thought the barn was following me, that time I drove nonstop to Florida. It was so real I could see the cracks between the boards, and a sign on it advertising a baking powder."

"My hallucination smelled of talcum powder and bay rum," said Deborah, unconvinced. "From a barber shop. And he was chewing gum. Anything that real, I'd as soon call a ghost and be done with it!"

Henry laughed. "Okay, so we have a ghost in the house," he said. "He didn't do anything to hurt you, did he? He didn't even say 'boo'? Let's have a drink to him."

Deborah lifted a forefinger. "Shhh—"

"What?"

"There's somebody in the living room right now. I hear voices."

"I don't."

She was pale. "He's back! My God, Henry, he's back!"

"Nonsense. You sit here, and I'll go see."

"I'm coming with you."

With Henry leading they sped silently along the hall to the living room. Just inside the front door, which was open, stood three people—the man in the chocolate-brown suit, precisely as Deborah had described him, and a younger man with extraordinarily dark, heavy eyebrows and a girl of twenty or so

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in a green silk maternity blouse and white sandals.

"This is the one I think you should take," the pudgy little man was saying. "Two bedrooms. An all-electric kitchen. The price is twenty-three-five, but the bank has taken it over. Give me a good down payment and I think I can get it for you for twenty-two."

"Look here, folks," Henry broke in, "I think there's been some mistake—"

The three paid not the slightest attention to him.

"What about the furniture?" asked the young wife. "It's lovely. Wall-to-wall carpet, too."

"That's the special inducement I mentioned," said the pudgy real-estate man. "It's all paid for, but used furniture doesn't bring much at an auction, which is the way the bank would have to sell it. You folks tack on a thousand—making the total price an even twenty-three—and I'm sure you can have the furniture. It will represent a big saving for you."

"Listen," said Henry, raising his voice as he grew angry, "I don't know whose house you think you're in, but this place is not for sale."

With an exclamation, Deborah turned and ran back down the hall. The door of the rear porch slammed. Henry hesitated, then decided he could deal with the intruders later—Deborah's fright was more important, for the moment. He followed her, calling her name.

"I'm out here, dear," she answered. She was standing on the lawn, close to a panel of plastic screen, where a trumpet vine hid her from the house. "Oh, I'm so frightened—"

"It's all right," Henry reassured her. "There's nothing to be afraid of. It just came to me. You know what? They're deaf. That's what it is—all three of them are deaf."

"But they're talking to each other."

"Deaf people talk to each other. They're reading each other's lips."

"But they saw us! We were right in the same room with them!"

"No, we really weren't. We were at the front end of the hall, and it's dark there. Their eyes were still dazzled from the sunshine outside. They simply didn't see us."

"They're ghosts. I tell you they *are*."

He kissed her. "Ghosts don't sell real estate, sweetheart. They don't wear maternity dresses, either—not any ghosts I ever heard of! You stay here now, and I'll go in and get rid of them."

"Don't leave me!" cried Deborah in terror. "I—I haven't told you, but I've felt strange for days. Oh, darling, I'm afraid I'm losing my mind!"

"Then I'm losing mine too," said Henry comfortingly, "because I saw your ghosts and they didn't scare me a bit. Deb, you know perfectly well there's no such thing as a ghost."

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"I'm coming back inside with you."

"I wish you wouldn't."

"Please—"

They found the three strangers, evidently after a tour of the two bedrooms, in the kitchen. The husband was agreeing that the house was a bargain, furnished, and saying he could pay five thousand dollars down in cash.

"This house belongs to me," said Henry. He raised his voice to a shout. "This house is not for sale!"

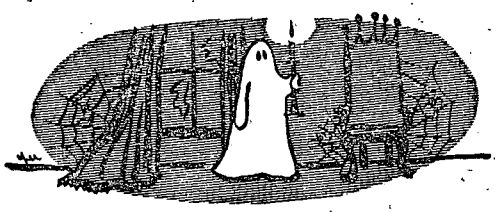
"I'm sure that will be satisfactory," said the real-estate man to the husband, "and since you're dealing with the bank that holds the mortgage, it'll be a simple matter to transfer the papers."

The young wife was so happy to know the house was hers that she pirouetted out of the kitchen into the living room, and on through the living room to the front door. Smiling, the two men followed her.

Jaw thrust out, Henry went after them doggedly. He caught up with the realtor just as, key in hand, the pudgy man stepped out onto the red brick stoop and turned to lock the door. "I've had about enough of this. Now you listen to me," Henry said, and put his hand heavily on the man's brown worsted shoulder.

It sliced right through.

"The young couple that had this place would be glad to know you like it so much," the real-estate man was saying. "They were just about your age. It was a terrible thing. A trailer truck sideswiped their car on the throughway. They never knew what hit them."



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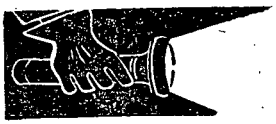

BEST MYSTERIES OF 1963

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

1963 was the year of the spy novel, the year of intrigue and assassination in fiction and in terrible fact, the year when Ian Fleming gained thousands of new readers (with one of his weakest novels) and lost (may he rest in peace) one old one, the year of a renewed outcry against violence in entertainment, as if a world of violent terror would turn idyllic if only writers would pretend it wasn't there.

The book year started well, with a model of the police-procedural novel on the first publishing day of the year:

GIDEON'S RIDE, *by J. J. Marric* (Harper & Row, $3.50)

followed in short order by a brilliant book of criminous stories:

PRACTISE TO DECEIVE, *by George Bradshaw* (Harcourt, Brace & World, $3.95)

and the ultimate definitive bibliography of

SHERLOCK HOLMES, *by Edgar W. Smith* (Baker Street Irregulars, $5)

February brought the most distinguished work of a noted critic-novelist and a grand comedic change of pace by an old master:

THE EXPENDABLE MAN, *by Dorothy B. Hughes* (Random, $3.95)
THE LIGHT OF DAY, *by Eric Ambler* (Knopf, $3.95)

plus an admirable new version of a classic trial and the first book appearance of important fact-crime essays from 1901:

OSCAR WILDE, *by H. Montgomery Hyde* (Penguin 1857, 85¢)
STRANGE STUDIES FROM LIFE, *by A. Conan Doyle* (Candlelight, $3)

March introduced a faultless fiction-from-fact and the first of the year's many strong debuts from abroad:

THE MASSINGHAM AFFAIR, *by Edward Grierson* (Doubleday, $3.95)
LOVE IN AMSTERDAM, *by Nicolas Freeling* (Harper & Row, $3.50)

along with the first of the year's anthologies, all excellent:

ELLERY QUEEN'S ANTHOLOGY: 1963 MID-YEAR EDITION (Davis, $1)
ELLERY QUEEN'S 1964 ANTHOLOGY (Davis, $1)
ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MIX . . . #18 (Random, $4.95)

In April, two of crime's most witching women cast their latest spells, and the greatest of detectives received a witty and stylish tribute:

A LITTLE LESS THAN KIND, *by Charlotte Armstrong* (Coward-McCann, $3.95)
THE TROUBLE MAKERS, *by Celia Fremlin* (Lippincott, $3.50)
THE SHERLOCK HOLMES COMPANION, *by Michael & Mollie Hardwick* (Doubleday, $4.95)

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and with the bright foolishness of spring came the perfect parody on 1963's preoccupation with spy novels:

ALLIGATOR, by I*n Fl*m*ng [Michael K. Frith & Christopher B. Cerf] (Vanitas V4402, 50¢)

English writers dominated May, with a strong formal detective story, a study in the moods of love and death, and a fine fresh novelty:

MURDER A LA MODE, by Patricia Moyes (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, $3.75)
DEAD OF SUMMER, by Mary Kelly (Mill-Morrow, $3.95)
IT'S DIFFERENT ABROAD, by Henry Calvin (Harper & Row, $3.50)

and August brought another remarkable new foreigner:

BLACK SISTER, by Dagmar Edqvist (Crime Club, $3.95)

With the fall arrived the best of the year's intrigue-thrillers and two perfect specimens of the simon-pure detective baffler:

THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME, by Gavin Lyall (Scribner's, $3.95)
THE MIRROR CRACK'D, by Agatha Christie (Dodd, Mead, $3.75)
THE PLAYER ON THE OTHER SIDE, by Ellery Queen (Random, $3.95)

October produced the year's best non-Queen anthology:

ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS STORIES MY MOTHER NEVER TOLD ME (Random, $5.95)

and 1963's two outstanding American first novels:

FLORENTINE FINISH, by Cornelius Hirschberg (Harper & Row, $3.95)
THE NEON HAYSTACK, by James Michael Ullman (Simon & Schuster, $3.50)

November was an unusually rich month, with the year's leaders in short stories, in fact-crime, in imports, and in crime-critique:

THE MEN WHO EXPLAINED MIRACLES, by John Dickson Carr (Harper, $3.50)
OSCAR SLATER, by Peter Hunt (Collier AS500, 95¢)
THE 10:30 FROM MARSEILLES, by Sébastien Japrisot (Crime Club, $3.50)
DOWN THESE MEAN STREETS A MAN MUST GO: RAYMOND CHANDLER'S KNIGHT, by Philip Durham (U. North Carolina, $5)

along with a nobly absurd reduction of the intrigue-melodrama and a lesson in the application of detective techniques to the straight novel:

THE ASSASSINATION BUREAU, LTD., by Jack London, completed by Robert L. Fish (McGraw-Hill, $4.50)
THE LAST TRESILIANS, by J. I. M. Stewart ["Michael Innes"] (Norton, $4.50)

Even normally dull December greeted us with a strong procedural novel and a joyous volume of EQMM stories:

THE GRUDGE, by Bert & Dolores Hitchens (Crime Club, $3.50)
PEOPLE VS. WITHERS & MALONE, by Stuart Palmer & Craig Rice (Simon & Schuster, $3.50)

It was the year of intrigue and violence and irony. Jack London's brilliant try at making political assassination comic was published on November 25, the day that we all watched a veiled woman walk in tragedy.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **E. L. PRICE**

TITLE: ***Point of No Return***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A quiet little tale—oh, how quiet! But you will feel the characters, you will know Elaine and George—as if you've known them all your life . . .*

GEORGE HAD REMEMBERED IT WAS his wedding anniversary even before she called at five minutes of five to remind him, ever so subtlely, that this evening was something special, and would he please pick up her beige suit at the cleaners and some vanilla ice cream. It was her third call of the day, and the conversation ended with a refrain that was without variation.

"You love me, hon?" she cooed.

"Yes," he answered in a low voice, knowing she would challenge this simple confirmation, insist on uncompromising surrender.

"Yes?" she pursued. "Yes, what?"

"Yes, I do," he said, not ready, just yet, for the inevitable capitulation.

"Georgie," she coaxed, "you do *what?*"

Then he whispered it, trapped finally by the guile of her insistent catechism. "I love you."

Across the desk, Miss Patterson scanned her shorthand notes, frowned at a broken fingernail, and tried, unsuccessfully, not to listen.

George had not been able, in three years of marriage, to discourage Elaine's twice-daily calls to the office. He had broached the subject one evening, months ago, during a television commercial. But the minute the words left his mouth he knew he was going to be sorry for them. She had stopped humming the breakfast food commercial and had lifted her head from his shoulder. Although her eyes brimmed with tears, she made it at once evident, by the manner in which

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she lifted her chin, that *she* wasn't going to make an issue over a little thing like *that*.

But later, when he had got into bed and touched her cheek with his lips, she turned silently away. "Good night," he said. The words hung in the air—empty, unanswered. His head tensed against the pillow; he would not be able to sleep. He heard the single half hour chime of the clock and then the soft, regular sound of her breathing.

"Elaine," he whispered in the night. But there was no answer. Without having risen to the occasion of a scene, she had, it seemed to him, won a total victory.

Contrite, *he* had called *her* from the office the next morning. She was petulant at first; until, resigned in his defeat, he suggested that if she weren't busy in the afternoon, she might give him a ring.

This apologetic remark had been the license for which she had waited. The phone calls were immediately resumed—one at mid-morning, the other after lunch. But the time when he had looked forward to them was past. Her ability to cull naive adventure from the purchase of four lamb chops or the use of a new detergent had dissipated all the original charm . . .

Anniversary or not, today had got off to a bad start. Miss Patterson, who liked the inevitable to occur on schedule, had made it a practice to take her morning coffee break at 10:30 sharp, the established time of Elaine's first call. But she had no sooner stepped out the door than Mr. Boyle entered. It was an unexpected visit; junior partners were ordinarily summoned to Mr. Boyle's office on the floor above.

"George," he said, "I've just gone over the draft of your report. If your projections are one hundred per cent correct, we're in a great . . ." The phone rang. ". . . bargaining position." At the second ring he nodded toward the phone. "Answer it, George."

At the first sound he pressed the receiver closer to his ear.

"Georgie?"

How could she take an ordinary name like George and make it come out Joe-jee? There had been a time when the sound of his name, more pouted than spoken, had exacted an indefinable sensation of pleasure. When, he wondered, at what exact moment had the same sound begun to irritate him?

"Yes," he said, keeping his voice flat and businesslike.

"Sweetie-lover, I just wanted to tell you that while you're sitting in that nice, air-conditioned office, I've been toiling like a slave. I've cleaned the pantry and put fresh paper on the shelves, and now I've started on the living room. Talk about heat in the city, you ought to be out here! Mr. McHugh was by and fixed the fan. I just tote it around with me, from room to room. And while he was here . . . oh, that's going to be a surprise. No, I'm not going to

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mention it! Never mind now—"

Suddenly her voice dropped, conspiratorially. "Miss Lady, please!" she whispered to the cocker spaniel he had given her a year ago. "You know your daddy doesn't allow you in *his* chair. You'll get hair all over it and I just finished—"

"Yes," he broke in, "certainly."

"Georgie," she cried, "are you terribly busy, or something? Is mean old bossman standing over you?"

He felt the color rising above his neck. "Yes," he said.

"Well, then, I'll call you after lunch," she bubbled, and he eased the receiver onto its cradle.

"The little bride, I'll bet," Mr. Boyle said. "You can always tell. Bring her in for lunch some day, George. Like to see her again." He paused and picked up the report. "Well, first things first. Let's polish it a bit and tighten up your conclusion. That's where the directors will sit up and take notice. See if you can have it ready for another run-through at four o'clock."

When the afternoon phone call came, Miss Patterson glanced at her watch. 3:30. "We've still got four pages to go," she said tentatively.

George waited until she had closed the door, then picked up the phone. He immediately told Elaine that he had eaten a light lunch. Since it was her daily custom to inquire, he volunteered the information at once. She had to plan for dinner, she reminded him from time to time, and she didn't want to duplicate. Many a marriage had "gone on the rocks," she had read somewhere, from just that sort of thing.

". . . and no dessert," he said, pleased with the ease of his lying.

"You'll be *starved* by dinner," she cried. "Guess what *we're* having?"

"Can't imagine," he said, penciling in a comma that Miss Patterson had omitted on page nine.

"Steak!" she breathed into the phone, as though suddenly inspired. "And mashed potatoes, baby limas, and sliced tomatoes. And guess what we're having for dessert?"

He waited, and her voice thrilled in a fanfare. "Apple pie with ice cream."

"Sounds fine," he said, underlining a sentence on page ten.

"I just hope you realize why I went to all this trouble. I promised myself I wouldn't tease you—but you *do* know, *don't* you?"

Hearing the door open, he swung around in his chair. "Mr. Boyle," Miss Patterson warned. "He just got off the elevator."

"Oh, no," George said into the phone. Another few minutes and the report would have been finished. If only she hadn't called, just this once. "Got to hang up," he said brusquely. "Meeting. See you at six."

Mr. Boyle opened the door. "Ready, George?"

"Just the last two pages," George

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said. "They still need a little polishing. I'll have it on your desk in fifteen minutes."

"You've got exactly eight. I'm making that plane for Chicago, or else." He pulled his head out the door and was gone.

"Another few minutes," George said aloud to the closed door. "That's all I needed."

At five minutes to five the phone rang. "It's your wife," Miss Patterson said, unable to control the fact that this third and unscheduled call had caught her completely off guard.

"Georgie? Hon, you *do* know what today is, don't you?"

"Yes," he said, "I know."

"There! I knew you knew. Hon, you won't forget to pick up my beige suit at the cleaners? And the ice cream?"

The fact that he did not really like ice cream—just as he was not particularly fond of apple pie—had never made any impression on Elaine. Once, on a dinner date, he had remarked that he thought the Great American Dessert was a little overrated. "You're teasing," she had laughed, "all men like apple pie." After that it appeared on the menu at least once a week . . .

On the 5:20 home, George took the carbon copy of the report from his brief case, riffled through a few pages then put it back and closed his eyes. His fingers moved over the case, rested on the lock.

The cultured pearls were inside. Miss Patterson had taken an extra half hour at lunch to pick them out for him. They were very fine, perfectly matched, and had an exquisite luster, she had assured him. Their very perfection had somehow depressed him.

I'm 34, he thought suddenly. How had everything happened—the way it had? How had he come to marry Elaine? What had failed to warn him, four years ago, on that first date, that he was easing himself into a trap? What had driven him on?

No doubt about it, he thought, the rites of courtship are a throwback to the old caveman stuff. If you don't fight for the prize, you don't want it. Maybe it was *that* simple.

And it had been a tournament. At the peak of the campaign he had thought he could not live without Elaine. He had doubled his efforts to outstrip Hank Belson, his fellow junior partner. He had persevered, and he had emerged victorious. The prize was his, forever his, until—as the Justice of the Peace had murmured over them—"death do you part."

When, he thought, was the point of no return? Did other men also wonder two, three, ten years later—always too late—just what had happened?

It had begun, innocently enough, four years ago in April when Elaine had joined the firm as Mr. Boyle's

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private secretary. He remembered the softness of her accent, Southern even in its laughter, and the changing sea-green of her eyes. When, that Monday morning of her second week, she accepted the rose for her bud vase and lifted those melting eyes to his, he officially entered the tournament.

Then, one Thursday night as they waited in line to see a new French movie, George asked Elaine to Long Island for the coming Saturday. He would meet her at the station, show her the house, and maybe they would take a lunch to the beach. She might like the house, he said, though he hadn't done much with it since his folks retired to Florida. It was a double-threat invitation: he would have her company for the day and she would be unavailable to his opponent. Hank *always* dropped by her apartment on Saturday afternoons, she had confided to George earlier.

Elaine accepted the invitation with demure alacrity. But he would have to put her on the train by midnight, she said; she had her reputation to think of.

The following week she set about cooling Hank's attentions, and with little more than a shrug he had withdrawn from the battle. Had he looked deep into her eyes, George wondered now, and discovered the imminent, irrevocable reflection of orange blossoms?

In the first few months of their marriage George had shown off his bride like a prized possession to which he had fallen heir through some unaccountable stroke of good fortune. She charmed the grocer, the butcher, the corner florist. The entire male constituency of their block was ever-ready to lend a hand. Is was no fault of hers, she said, that women did not take to her; it was merely a statement of fact. As a result, they seldom entertained, and were even less seldom invited out.

But through the cool nights of that autumn and into the warm mornings of spring, she continued to coo like a turtle dove in her kitchen, in the living room, in the bedroom. She was vivacious when he left for work and effervescent when he returned. Each week-end was a new honeymoon. It would always be this way, she promised.

A honeymoon with anniversaries, he thought. But didn't she know, couldn't she tell that he didn't want a honeymoon forever—that on a moment's notice he would have traded the bride in her for a wife and a real home and children. When he had mentioned the possibility of a child—as recently as last Christmas—she had put him off with her special laugh and had snuggled closer. "After all," she whispered, "we have Miss Lady."

It was on a Sunday evening—three? four? months ago—that he had come to a sudden realization. He was glad the week-end was over. He had been unable to get beyond

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the first page of the *Times*. Ostensibly, she was watching a variety show on television as, one arm around his shoulder, she ran a finger across the stubble of his Sunday beard.

At last he let the crumpled paper slide to the floor. At that moment he knew he looked forward to the office, looked forward to the relative peace of crowded elevators and voices, muted through walls, to the comforting anonymity of street noises, even to the efficient, impersonal, undemanding Miss Patterson . . .

Swinging off the train, George started up the street, and then remembering her instructions he stopped at the cleaners. "A beige suit," he said to the clerk absently, involved totally now in his reverie. What would it have been like, he wondered, if he had remained a bachelor, living alone in the house with its peace and quiet. One thing sure, he told himself, the furniture wouldn't have been shifted around every month. He would have been able to walk through the house blindfolded without tripping over a chair, or reach out in the night and switch on the bedside lamp without knocking over a cluster of china figurines.

George shifted his brief case, pocketed the change, and picked up the hanger. Static electricity in the plastic covering pulled her suit against him. He brushed it away. She must be up to something, he thought. What will it be this time? The bedroom? The kitchen, maybe. Surely not the bathroom. Last year she had painted the bathroom twice. First, a pale blue. The color was good and it was an improvement. But in the fall, for a number of reasons which she cited from a decorating magazine, she painted it pink. It was the very latest for bathrooms, she said; one has to keep up with the newest style trends. Had the mailman left another magazine at the door, he wondered.

As he turned up the steps, he juggled the hanger and brief case and attempted with a free hand to separate the door key from the loose change in his pocket. He heard the staccato clatter of her heels in the foyer. It was the sound that little girls made when they paraded in their mothers' shoes.

"Hi, sweetie," she cried, swinging the door open. She took the hanger, looked quickly to his hand with the key poised in mid-air. "You forgot the *ice cream*. I *knew* I should have tucked a note in your suit." She pulled him into the living room and carefully placed the brief case on the coffee table.

No, he thought, I won't give her the pearls just yet. He looked at the brief case. After dinner, he thought.

Bending for her kiss, his eyes swept the room.

"Notice anything?" she asked, watching his face.

Here we go, he thought, the old guessing game. If he were lucky he

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could be in a shower in five minutes. "New lamp shade," he said. "Looks nice."

She shook her head. "Too obvious. Something else."

He surveyed the room again. Everything was shifted, but what was the one single thing he was supposed to seize on? He began guessing at random. The record albums were rearranged. No. His humidor had been moved from its customary place beside his chair. No—and she stamped her foot with delighted impatience. The Chinese water color from upstairs now hung where his favorite Braque print had been. She laughed, shaking her head.

"I give up," he said. "I want to get out of this suit. What is it?"

"The clock!" she cried. "Your father's old mantel clock that never worked And you didn't even miss it! Mr. McHugh took it with him when he stopped by to fix the fan. If the mainspring isn't broken, he can make it work—he promised. All it needs is someone to take a little interest. He said he'll try to bring it back this evening."

"Elaine." He wanted his voice to sound severe. "Why do you let old man McHugh keep doing things for you? It just gives him a chance to hang around."

He hoped McHugh wouldn't return with the clock tonight. He didn't feel up to listening to a recitation of various crimes the old man had allegedly solved during his twenty years on the police force. George had never understood Elaine's fascination for those morbid stories. It was bad enough that McHugh had made a habit of coming across the back yard to scratch on the screen door—"Anybody home? Anybody home?" Once started on a tale, embellished beyond credulity, he was impossible to get rid of. "Besides, the spring *is* broken," George said. "Now I've got to get into a shower. Give me ten minutes."

Upstairs, he closed the bedroom door and stripped off his suit. Pulling the seersucker robe over his shoulders, he slipped a hand into the pocket. He knew it would be there. Unfolding the paper, he read: *Did my lover miss me today?*

She had used that one last week. He walked to the bed, ran a hand under the pillow, extracted the note. *For a wonderful year, a trillion kisses, always, always, always, your wife.*

Rolling both slips into a single ball, he realized now that after three years he took pleasure in seeking them out, quickly and efficiently, and destroying them.

He switched on the shower; then turning to the mirror he saw his face through a cluster of white wedding bells sketched in soap. They were linked with delicate scrolls of ribbon drawn in lipstick. He clicked the lock on the door. Wetting a corner of his towel, he erased the bells. He lifted the bar of soap, held it before the mirror. What could he write?

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"Hurry, hon," she called from the stairwell. "We're going to have two martinis apiece and then a nice dinner by candlelight. Doesn't that sound nice?"

"Watch the vermouth," he called through the door. "Not too much."

"They're already made," she cried triumphantly, "Whipped them up this afternoon and put them in the refrigerator."

Drop dead, he scrawled across the mirror and let the soap fall into the basin. Better a trite something than a clever nothing, he said aloud, and stepped into the shower.

At the first rapping on the door he continued to sing. When it came again, louder, more insistent, he turned off the shower.

"What are you *doing*?" she called. "I'm going to pour the martinis now. I just wanted to tell you beforehand that I forgot to get cocktail onions, so I'm going to put an olive in yours anyway. Just for looks. You don't *have* to eat it."

"Be right down," he answered.

He waited, and when the sound of her heels had faded down the stairs, he wiped the mirror clean and unlocked the door.

Sprawled across the sofa, he switched on the lamp and picked up his newspaper. Clicking, clicking, like those bone sticks they rattle in rhumba bands, he heard her heels approaching from the kitchen, through the dining room, through the doorway of the living room.

With a tilt of her head she directed him to move over and handed him his martini. "Did him have a bad day at that bad old office?" she asked, easing herself beside him.

"So-so," he replied softly, glancing at the headline. It was the tone he had learned to inflect so that he could take part in the question-and-answer session without thinking, and still give a semblance of meaning, of careful consideration, to his reply. Lifting his martini in silent toast, he sipped. Still too much vermouth he thought, but I'm not going to bring it up. Fishing the olive from his glass, he held it out to Elaine. He sipped again.

"Miss Lady was a very bad girl today. I told her I was going to have Papa speak to her. She was in the yard and that nasty black scottie got in through the fence. I chased him right out and put Miss Lady in the kitchen and I told her she couldn't have dinner with us tonight." Replenishing both glasses, she carried the empty pitcher and the ashtray with its two olive pits into the kitchen.

George looked at the swirling, oily surface and drained the glass. He stretched out again and picked up the paper. He looked for the ashtray, then flicked his cigarette ash into her African violet pot. He would have liked another martini but, hearing her voice, decided against going into the kitchen. She and that dog were talking.

"Naughty, naughty, *naughty* girl,"

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the words drifted into the room and hung in the air like a trapped echo. "I don't like my Miss Lady carrying on with just any . . ." And a moment later, "Georgie, light the candles, *s'il vous plais*, everything's ready."

When he held her chair, she dipped in curtsey. "*Mercy*," she said, and he knew he was being thanked in her best South Carolinian French.

When George had finished his apple pie, Elaine rose and came around the table. "No, you go right on into the living room and get comfortable with your paper. I'll just give the dishes a lick-and-a-promise. Then we'll have the whole evening to ourselves."

George eased off his shoes and turned to page three. He heard her voice, but he read on, determined to finish the first paragraph of the President's speech.

"Georgie," she called again, "could you come here for just a moment?"

He folded the paper, rose, and ground out his cigarette in the soft earth around the violet.

She was scouring the steak grill. The dishwasher hummed through its final rinse. "It's positively sweltering in this kitchen. Open the door and latch the screen, please. Miss Lady is positively *not* going outside." She raised a hand from the sink, pointed to the overhead cupboard. "If you've finished that newspaper, hon, would you get your mother's Dutch oven down for me? It's on the top shelf—here, right over the sink. It's iron and it weighs a ton but it's just the thing for baked beans. Be *careful* now—use the *ladder*."

He opened the ladder, braced it against the counter, and mounted to the top step. Opening the cupboard door, he pulled the oven toward the edge of the shelf to get a better grip. It *was* heavy.

"I don't know what we'd do without a strong man around the house," she cooed to Miss Lady. "Even though he forgets to bring home ice cream—or even what day it is."

He looked down. She was sprinkling scouring powder over the grill. Her head was directly in line with the heavy Dutch oven. If he dropped it, she would be dead in an instant . . . He felt a sudden dizziness, closed his eyes. Elaine! he would cry afterward. But she would be dead, very dead.

He would tip over the ladder to show how he had fallen. He would take out the pearls, leave them on the coffee table for someone to discover. Then he would call Doctor Meyers, cry hysterically, "There's been an accident—my wife—I'm afraid she's—" Doctor Meyers could call the police when he got here.

George opened his eyes, saw the veins on his hands straining with the weight of the oven. Then her head lifted. In the timeless quantity of that moment, when their eyes met, he wondered if she guessed.

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But her face revealed no flicker of surprise, no suspicion, no fear. Hating her confidence, outraged by its meaning, George opened his fingers, felt a sudden, aching relief, and jerked his eyes toward the ceiling.

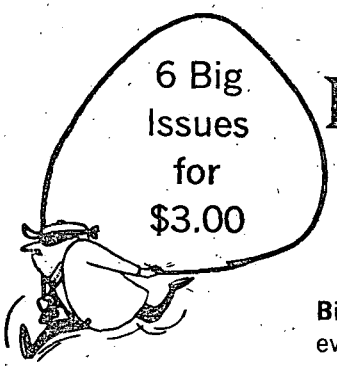
A dull thud stifled her cry. Then the heavy Dutch oven caromed against the sink, skidded, and shook the ladder as it finally crashed on the floor.

A half moan escaped with the sound of her body slumping downward.

Then it was quiet.

Frozen on the ladder, unable to take his eyes from the ceiling, he thought: I must get down now. There's a lot to do.

As he lowered his head, then turned his eyes across the room, down the opposite wall, down the screen door, he saw the man framed against the screen. Under one arm he carried a mantel clock. A twisted spring dangled like a ridiculous toy from the other hand, and the man's mouth hung open like that of a child momentarily hypnotized by the performance of a wondrous act.



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We published Ed Dumonte's "first story" ("Thank You, Mr. Thurston") in our July 1963 issue; you will recall it as a fine "first," with an especially strong narrative grip . . . Well, hard as it is for a new writer to sell his or her "first story," selling the second story often proves more difficult. Here is Mr. Dumonte's second story, and he comes through with flying pennants.

His "first story" showed surprising control, both of plot and of writing, for a beginner. In his second story Mr. Dumonte's control of content and restraint of expression are even more manifest . . . We expect "great things" of this newcomer—and we are confident that he will not disappoint us.

THE THIRD WEDNESDAY OF THE MONTH

by ED DUMONTE

AT TWENTY MINUTES BEFORE NINE o'clock on the seventeenth of May, Clarence Willoughby stood outside the front door of the First National Bank of Overton, Iowa, fidgeting, and waiting impatiently for the Head Cashier to arrive.

"You take the term 'banker's hours' literally, eh, Johnson?" Clarence would like to say. Or, cuttingly, "Are you here this morning as Head Cashier, Johnson, or as a customer?"

Johnson just wasn't a bank-man; he didn't seem to understand that there were important things to be done before the doors opened in the morning. But then he had come into the bank only a few years ago by way of the president's daughter—so what could you expect?

Clarence, on the other hand, had started at the bank during the war, twenty years ago. At that time he had been a minor godsend to the Overton First National. He was neat, accurate, reliable, punctual, and willing to work for a bank teller's salary while everybody else was making a fortune at defense work . . .

"Morning, Willoughby—ready and waiting again, I see. A fine day to rob a bank, eh, Willoughby?"

"Good morning, Mr. Johnson," Clarence replied. "Yes, sir, it's a fine day."

Behind schedule as usual, Clarence rushed into the bank and hurriedly hung up his hat and coat. When Johnson had the vault open, Clarence got his cash drawer and took it to his cage. He quickly counted the money in the drawer, checked the amount with the figure he had arrived at the night before, filled the change machine in the cage, and made out the tedious

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Report of Currency Denomination and Amount.

By that time it was nine o'clock, and Johnson snapped back the lock on the front door to begin another day at the Overton First National Bank.

With the opening of the door Clarence was swept up in the first rush of the day's bank business, mostly making change for local shopkeepers. That was followed almost immediately by the second rush—housewives depositing money to cover checks they planned to write or had already written. So it was after eleven before Clarence realized that the seventeenth was the third Wednesday of the month. And that was significant.

"What the hell goes on here, Willoughby? That was a twenty I just gave you—this is only change for a ten."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Hampden. You're right, it was a twenty you gave me."

"Do the tellers in this bank get to keep all they knock down, Willoughby?"

On the third Wednesday of May, as on the third Wednesday of every month, the First National's armored-car service arrived in Overton to make its monthly collections. It came into town by way of Highway 32, across the Overton Avenue bridge, stopping at the Sunset Inn at the edge of town and then at the Corn Exchange Bank on Main Street before finally reaching the First National at 2:30 P.M.

The schedule had been exactly the same ever since Clarence started at the bank twenty years ago and the routine never varied. Two men got out of the front of the armored car and walked around to the back. One of the men stepped three paces to the rear of the car and drew his revolver while the second unlocked the heavy, steel-plated back door of the car. A third man, inside the car, passed out several bags of money, closed and bolted the door, and then covered the two outside men from a peephole in the side of the car.

The first two men—one carrying, the other acting as armed guard—brought the money through the front door of the bank and back to the vault where Clarence would be waiting to surrender several other bags of money that were to be the First National's deposit for the Federal Reserve Bank at Des Moines. The armored-car guards would take a receipt from Clarence for the money they brought and sign another for the money they took. Then they would leave the bank, one man carrying and the other following three paces behind with his gun drawn, put the money in the back of the armored car, lock the door, get in, and drive away.

The whole operation never took more than five minutes. Clarence had watched it happen once a month for twenty years.

And for the past year he had been timing the actions of the armored-

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car guards to the split second . . .

"For heaven's sake, Mr. Willoughby, I've been standing here for ten minutes waiting to make a deposit. If you don't want my money, say so and I'll take it over to the Corn Exchange."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Conklin. I'll take care of you right now."

"What are you daydreaming about, Mr. Willoughby? Embezzling the bank's money?"

Clarence served the lunch-hour rush of depositors with something less than his usual efficiency. His mind was preoccupied again with making a decision he had been pondering once a month for the past year.

It would be so easy . . .

At one o'clock business slowed down a bit and Clarence had half an hour off for lunch. Mr Johnson relieved him in the cage and Clarence took his lunch into the vault to eat. Sitting on a chair surrounded by money, he nibbled a tuna fish sandwich—and finally came to a decision.

The money that was to be picked up by the armored car had been counted, wrapped, and placed to one side of the vault. Clarence separated the canvas bags filled with paper money from the ones filled with coins. On a ledge beside the canvas bags was a list of the serial numbers of the larger bills. Clarence folded this piece of paper and stuffed it into his pocket. There would be no way of tracing the bills of larger denomination. And no income tax to pay . . .

Shortly before two o'clock Sadie Claridge parked her flashy convertible at the side door of the bank and came in to make the weekly deposit for her personal savings account. A tall, full-blown, smoky-blonde, Sadie was proprietor of the Sunset Inn on the outskirts of town.

Sadie, it was rumored, had started work at the Sunset as one of the girls upstairs, and when her head for business had proved as adept as the rest of her she was promoted to the tables in the back room; finally she became the proprietor. Her second favorite pastime was adding up the figures in her bank book. She was the perfect partner for any scheme that made a lot of money and made it fast.

If Sadie reported that the armored car had come into town on schedule, Clarence would say the code words that set the plan in motion . . .

"Good afternoon, Mr. Willoughby. Lovely day, isn't it?"

"Yes, indeed, Miss Claridge," Clarence said. "A fine day to be out getting some sun."

"Well, banker's hours being what they are, perhaps you'll get the chance this afternoon."

The last half hour of Clarence's long-term operation passed slowly. He spent the time thinking of Sadie Claridge and a lakeside cabin where

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they would have to hide out for a month. Or maybe it would be for three months.

At fifteen minutes past two Clarence sneaked the revolver from his cash drawer into his pocket.

The armored car stopped outside the front door of the bank exactly on time. The two men in front got out and walked around to the back of the car. One of them unlocked the rear door and the other stepped back three paces and drew his gun. They walked through the bank—one carrying, one guarding—while Clarence finished a transaction with a customer.

Long association—twenty years—had removed all suspicion of Clarence on the part of the guards. So by arriving a few seconds late Clarence easily managed to get behind the guards as they entered the vault. Inside, the first guard set down the bags of money he was carrying and the second holstered his gun to help his partner load up with the bags that were going out to the armored car.

At the precise moment that the guard's gun was safely in its holster, Clarence whipped out his own revolver. He pushed the first man, who was off balance, to the floor and slammed the other over the head with the barrel of his gun. When the first made a move to get up, Clarence kicked him in the head. That would keep them quiet for the minute or two he needed to get away.

Clarence stuffed half a dozen of the canvas bags under his arm and stepped out of the vault. Johnson's desk was between the vault and the side door of the bank.

"Willoughby, what are you doing? What's the meaning of this?"

"Okay, Johnson, this is it!" Clarence snarled. He squeezed the trigger and felt the gun buck in his hand. The .38 caliber slug hit Johnson between the eyes and exploded out the rear of his head. "I hadn't planned on that, Johnson. I did it just for fun."

Then it was only four steps out the door of the bank to Sadie Claridge's convertible—and to a six-months' idyll at a lakeside hideaway with a beautiful woman and all the money he could ever use . . .

"Willoughby, are you finished counting the money for your cash drawer?"

"Just finishing, Mr. Johnson."

"Well, hurry it up. I want to close the vault and get out of here."

When the vault had been closed and locked they left the bank together. Johnson pulled the front door shut, shook it to test the lock.

"Well, we got through another day at the salt mine, eh, Willoughby?"

"Yes, sir, we got through another day," Clarence said, and as he turned away to walk to his room at the boarding house he smiled faintly. One day—one third Wednesday of one month of one year—it would happen, it would really happen . . .

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first publication in the U. S.

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**JULIAN SYMONS**
TITLE:	***The Humdrum Murder***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Francis Quarles
LOCALE:	London
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*A "pure" deductive detective story in the classical tradition, with Francis Quarles doing it "the hard way"—strictly as an armchair detective!*

TROUBLE WITH YOU AMATEUR detectives—private investigators, as you call yourselves—is you always have fancy cases to solve," Inspector Leeds grumbled to Francis Quarles. "Locked rooms, queer murder weapons like harpoons or swordsticks, rare Malayan poisons that tell you who the murderer is because only one of the suspects has been in Malaya. Fancy stuff, all of it. You'd be just lost if you had a plain humdrum murder case to solve that meant doing some real hard work."

"There are no humdrum murder cases," Quarles said. They had reached the brandy stage of a good dinner in his flat, and he spoke oracularly. "And no insoluble ones either. In every unsolved crime there is always a human error, a clue which if we could understand its meaning would point straight to the murderer. I remember ten years ago in the Anhalter poisoning—"

If wine and brandy had made Quarles oracular, they had made the Inspector bellicose. "Rubbish," he said roundly. "And I don't want to hear about what happened ten years ago. Save it for your reminiscences. Just take the case I'm working on now—the murder of a thirty-five-year-old motor mechanic

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named Jimmy Dreever. No fancy clues, nothing to rate more than a few lines in the papers—just a humdrum crime which is going to be solved by a lot of hard work."

"Tell me about it," Quarles suggested.

He slumped down in his chair with his eyes closed. He might have been thought to be asleep, but for the fact that halfway through the Inspector's recital he opened his eyes and poured some more brandy.

The facts were pretty simple, the Inspector began. Jimmy Dreever lived in a one-room flat with kitchenette in a block named Mellifont Court. "Don't get the idea there's anything grand about the block from that name," the Inspector said with an edge of sarcasm. "There's nothing grand at all about this case. Mellifont Court is a dingy red-brick block in the Wandsworth Road. It was put up about twenty years ago, jerry-built, and the paper's peeling off the walls—whole place is damp because there's no central heating system.

"Dingy's the word for it. Most of the flats are crowded with working-class families, three or four children in one bedroom. Dreever had been lucky—his flat had originally been taken by his father and mother and he lived there with them. Then his father got a job down at Southampton and the parents moved down there, leaving Dreever in occupation."

In his flat Jimmy Dreever had been shot—twice—between 12 and 1 o'clock on one Monday afternoon. The people in the nearby flats were out—the men at work and the women shopping. The shots had been heard, but nobody paid much attention to them or even realized that they were revolver shots and not a motorcycle backfiring. You learned not to poke your nose into other people's business in Mellifont Court.

None of the inhabitants had noticed anyone suspicious leaving around that time; they had seen people about, of course—there were a dozen vague descriptions given by children and old crones of men in light overcoats and women with scarves tied round their heads, even one description of a man with a limp. All these had been painstakingly followed up, but so far they had led nowhere.

The flat contained something more substantial in the way of clues. It was possible to reconstruct the crime fairly well. Probably Dreever had opened the door to his murderer and they had talked together—at least, there were the stubs of two cigarettes of different brands in an ashtray.

Then the murderer must have produced the revolver, got Dreever into a corner of the room, and shot him twice at close range. The revolver was not there ("probably at the bottom of the Thames by now," the Inspector said cheerfully), but the slugs showed that it was a small

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one—a .22. A woman's weapon—but had a woman used it? There was no lipstick on either of the cigarette stubs.

In a locked drawer of a dressing table the police had found a small book containing the names of more than twenty girls, with notes on each of them which indicated that Dreever was a persistent and successful Don Juan. This fact was confirmed by half a dozen bundles of letters, each from a different girl, tied together by colored ribbons. Further confirmation was offered by neighbors at Mellifont Court, who said that girls would often be in Dreever's flat until midnight or later.

"We've done a lot of chasing around to check on these girls," the Inspector went on. "Real hard work, something that wouldn't appeal to you."

Quarles opened one eye, looked at the Inspector, and closed it again.

"As a result we've got five suspects. Three of 'em are his current girl friends, a secretary named Betty Brewer, a manicurist named Ella Morris, and a girl named Maureen Pitt who worked in a dress shop. Dreever went in for girls a cut above himself socially as a general rule."

"He also apparently believed there was safety in numbers," Quarles murmured.

"Yes. Point is he was pretty slick with his excuses, so that each of the girls believed she was the only one. Any one of 'em might suddenly have discovered she was mistaken and gone to see Dreever with a gun. Then there are the discarded girl friends, but we've pretty well ruled all of them out except one, a sultry piece called Ruby Power who swore she'd have his blood at one time. Finally, there's a chap named Bill Chapman, a builder's foreman. Dreever had gone about a lot with Chapman's daughter, a teenager, and Chapman had threatened him more than once. Dreever got what was coming to him, no doubt about that."

The Inspector paused and wagged a finger at Quarles. "You can take your choice of the five of 'em; all had opportunity—the girls in their lunch hours, Chapman because he had a day off sick. That's the kind of case we get—not insoluble or anything like it, just the kind you solve through hard work."

It was then that Quarles poured the brandy. "Talking of work, what about Dreever's job? How was it he was at home waiting to be murdered in the middle of the day?"

"I was coming to that. Dreever worked for Pottle and Brady, motor engineers, until last Friday. He was a good workman but quarrelsome, and he had a real hard nerve—didn't mind what he said to anybody. That comes out in his relations with women, too.

"Last Friday after lunch he went

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a bit too far with Brady, one of the partners, and Brady told him to get his pay straight away. One of the other men told Dreever there was a job going at Alfred Lamprey's, about half a mile away, and he might try for that. Dreever laughed in his conceited way and said, 'Try for it? I'll get it.'

"When he got there the job that had been available was gone, but there was another for night work, and Dreever took that. He was due to start Monday night at nine."

"How did he pass the week-end?"

"Funny you should ask. I've talked to Brady, who said he thought Dreever might have had one or two drinks at Friday lunch-time, and to Lamprey who said he didn't mind about that. Lamprey engaged him because he could see Dreever knew his stuff, and he wanted a man badly for the night job.

"After he left Lamprey just after five o'clock on Friday evening, Dreever certainly hit the bottle. We've traced him round three or four pubs—he was with strangers all the time—and about nine o'clock that night he was refused a drink in a pub, argued with the publican, and was arrested as drunk and disorderly.

"He cooled off in jail over the week-end, came up on Monday morning, and was fined a pound. He went straight back to his flat after leaving court."

Now Quarles opened his eyes and sat up straight. "You say Dreever was with strangers from the time he got the new job until he was arrested?"

"You can take that as practically certain, yes."

"And he spent the whole time in prison from Friday evening until he was set free on Monday?" The Inspector agreed. "And then he went straight back to his flat. How do you know that?"

"He sported a taxi back to Mellifont Court. Then a little boy there saw him get out of the taxi and go up to his flat without speaking to anybody. Said hello to Dreever and got no answer."

"Is there a telephone in Dreever's flat?"

The Inspector laughed. "No. There aren't many telephones in Mellifont Court."

Quarles wrote on a piece of paper, pushed the paper over to the Inspector, and sank back in his chair. "That is almost certainly the name of the murderer," Quarles said. "I can offer no proof, but I suggest you look for a connection with one of the girls in Dreever's little book."

The Inspector looked at the paper and then stared at Quarles with his mouth open. "But how—?"

"Just check if there is a connection," Quarles said. "I am a modest man and I admit I may be wrong, but I cannot help thinking it unlikely."

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Two days later, a rueful Inspector Leeds came to see Quarles.

"You were right," he said. "One of those girls on the list had been engaged to him. Then Dreever picked her up, went about with her for a few months, got her into trouble, and refused to have anything more to do with her. She committed suicide. The murderer used the .22 revolver because it had belonged to the girl—sort of symbolic revenge—and he was fool enough to keep it. We've got a full confession. But I don't see how you knew."

"Simple enough. Dreever was killed in the middle of the day by someone who expected to find him at home. But who would have expected to find him at home on Monday, a working day? Not his girls, because he'd had no chance to communicate with them since he'd been sacked on Friday. Not the people at his old firm, Pottle and Brady, because they thought the job at Alfred Lamprey's was a daytime one.

"From Friday after he was sacked until he got back to his flat on Monday, Dreever didn't see or talk to anyone he knew well. There was no telephone in the flat, so he couldn't have rung up any of his girl friends after returning on Monday morning.

"So the astonishing fact was that there was only one person who absolutely and positively knew that Dreever wouldn't be at work on Monday lunchtime, and that was the man who'd engaged him to start on Monday evening—the name I wrote down as that of the probable murderer—Alfred Lamprey."

"Very neat," said the Inspector grudgingly. "Though there was another possible explanation. Dreever might have met one of his girls on Friday night unknown to us, and told her about his new job."

"Yes. You will remember that I said there was a chance I might be wrong. I did not refer, of course, to my deductions but to the possibility that the information you gave me might be inadequate or incorrect. Happily, it was not. Do you know how this case was solved, my dear Inspector?" The Inspector grunted. "By mental effort. Hard work."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: J. F. PEIRCE

TITLE: *The Lonely Ones*

TYPE: Crime and Detection

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *As curious a story as you've read in a long time, and with a curious fascination that will linger in your mind a long time . . . Try to forget—just try.*

IF PROFESSOR MALDEN RECOGNIZED me when he opened the door, he didn't show it.

I felt suddenly at a loss. I had expected recognition. For though he had seen me but once, and that a year before, he had reason to remember. Of course it had been at night and in a dimly lighted room, but he should have remembered.

As it was, it made things doubly hard, and I had little enough to go on. A hunch, a suspicion, nothing more.

I had knocked at the door a year ago, and he had answered it. My uniform and badge had been my identification, and he'd stood aside to let me enter; then with a wave of his hand he'd indicated a chair.

It was my first such assignment. And I blurted out that his wife was dead. But he just stood there as if he hadn't heard, as if his ears and mind were closed against it.

I was not used to death—not as used to it as I am now. A year ago I remembered the blood. My vision blurred, and everything went black for the second time within the hour.

I came to lying on a couch, with Professor Malden hovering over me.

Seeing that I had come around, he picked up a glass from an end table and held it to my lips.

"Drink," he said.

The brandy burned going down and I coughed, but it cleared the shadows.

Professor Malden then busied himself straightening the room. Whatever his wife had been, she hadn't been a housekeeper. But

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Malden, plump and motherly, was obviously just that.

Later when I was sitting up, I tried to apologize for the inconvenience I'd caused, but what could I say? Nothing. *I* should have been comforting *him.*

Didn't he realize what had happened? Didn't he care? He didn't seem an unfeeling man; in fact, he showed a very real concern for me, a gentleness that was almost womanly. Perhaps caring for me took his mind off his own troubles.

Now, a year later, there was no hint of recognition. In a curious way I was disappointed.

Again my uniform gave me entrance, and again with a wave of his hand he indicated a chair, then rushed ahead of me to clear it off, so that I could sit down. Books and papers were everywhere. Ashtrays overflowed. Cups and saucers were on all the tables and chairs.

Seeing my eyes take in the disorder, Professor Malden colored. He looked about as if he suddenly wanted to straighten the room, but instead he sat down abruptly.

"I must apologize for — for the state of things," he said, "but I haven't been well . . . It's hard for a bachelor, you know."

Didn't he mean *widower?*

He seemed to sense that he should know me but obviously he couldn't recall why or from where. Nor could I say, "Remember me? I'm the one who told you of your wife's death."

Instead, I said, "I'm Sergeant Cochran of Homicide."

He showed interest at the word "homicide." Most people do. That's why I use it, even though our department is too small to have separate divisions. But I'd been working on homicides since my promotion.

A framed photograph was lying face down on the table beside me, and instinctively I set it upright.

The picture showed a man in his mid-thirties, and scrawled across it was the inscription, *For Allen Malden—no boy could ask for a better mother.* As humor it was certainly in poor taste.

Before I could glance away from it, Malden picked up the photograph and without explanation slipped it into a desk drawer.

What was a picture of Thompson doing here, I wondered. And did it disprove my theory—or make it the more feasible?

I studied Malden as he returned to his chair. He was thinner than I remembered him, his skin fitting him more loosely, especially around the eyes. He had lost color, and for some reason his appearance and his actions didn't seem to go together.

He turned to me once he was seated, then said, "And now, Sergeant, what is it you want?"

"It's about the Deer Hill murders."

"Oh? I've been reading about them. The work of a madman obviously."

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"That's what we think too, but being a small department we feel handicapped. We've asked for help, but so far haven't received it. I thought perhaps you—"

"Perhaps I could tell you about insanity?"

"Yes."

He looked at me, cocking his head to one side.

"I suppose you want my full semester's course in thirty minutes?"

I grinned. "That's about the size of it."

"Well, I can only try."

His manner became more precise as he spoke, and I was transported across the years to the classroom.

"We all have within us the seeds of insanity," he began. "Sometimes illness, frustration, overwork, exhaustion, or shock suddenly bring them into bitter flower. Actually *insanity* is a social term, not a medical one. Primarily it's a disease of *civilized* people."

His irony was too apparent. It was a joke straight from the classroom.

"There are," he continued, "various types of insanity, but the one we're dealing with here is probably schizophrenia—what you'd call a split personality. It's like somnambulism, the two differing mainly in degree, and somnambulism being much the simpler form. The classic case concerns a certain—"

I took notes as he talked, and when he had finished, he turned, as if to one of his students, and said, "Now, do you have any questions?"

I did, and began at once. "In effect you're saying that two people are living in one body, each unaware of the other's presence, and that without reason, without warning, either can take over from the other at any time?"

"Essentially so, though I'd qualify what you said about reason. At times one facet of the personality will take over from the other 'apparently' without reason, whereas at other times an obvious association may call the other personality into being."

"Since these 'two people' are one and the same, are they alike or different?"

"Usually quite different. That's why the mind has imprisoned them in separate cells—so they can never confront one another. Take, for example, one of its commonest forms—the man whose private morality is unquestioned, but who in business is completely corrupt. He's not really the conscious hypocrite you'd call him. He keeps the two personalities walled apart in his mind. In a sense you might say that he keeps two sets of books—one for himself and one for God."

He paused, then suggested that we adjourn to the kitchen for coffee.

The kitchen was in even greater disorder than the living room, and again he apologized.

He lit the fire under the coffee pot, then rinsed two cups from a

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stack of dirty dishes in the sink.

"What makes you think the Deer Hill murders is a case of split personality?" I asked.

"Several things—if I can trust what I've read in the papers."

"You can. They haven't missed a trick."

"Including the usual criticism of the police?"

I smiled without humor. "Including that."

"Schizophrenia is one of my major areas," he said. "I've been working on a book about it for years, but can't get it finished. It's about a boy and girl, both schizophrenic. In one phase they're madly in love, but in the other they hate each other. And as they can't both change at the same time, there are occasions when the one in love is cruelly hurt by the one who hates."

The idea disgusted me, and seeing its effect, he changed the subject.

"But excuse me, Sergeant, I know you didn't come to hear about my faltering book."

He poured the coffee and set a cup in front of me.

"Cream and sugar?"

"Please."

He pushed the sugar bowl toward me, then took a container of cream from the refrigerator; but the cream had turned sour, and in the end he returned with a carton of milk and apologized for the lack of cream.

"The first Deer Hill murder," he said, handing me a spoon, "was that of a woman driving alone. Her car left the road on Deer Hill, and it might have appeared that her death was the result of the crash. But a message scrawled on the windshield with lipstick led to an autopsy, and it was discovered that most of her injuries had been inflicted with a knife. By the way, what was the message?"

"It was never released, and for good reason—it didn't make any sense. The message read: 'Mother loved me but she died.' "

I expected him to show surprise, but his face lit up with recognition.

"Wait here," he said excitedly.

He disappeared into the living room, and I could hear him rummaging among his books. Then, a few moments later, he returned with a slim volume, *The Lonely Ones*, by William Steig, which he thumbed expectantly.

Suddenly the smile faded from his face. The page he'd been looking for was missing. Someone had ripped it out.

"The devil!" he said angrily. "Who could have done that? Tear up a book?"

"When'd you read it last?"

He flipped to the copyright date. "1942—probably not since then."

I took the book and glanced through it. The name *Harvey Thompson* was written diagonally across the flyleaf. Thompson again.

The book itself consisted of simple line drawings—cartoons really. Maybe they'd be called expressionistic. One of them was of a sour-

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faced old man sitting cramped-up in a box. The caption opposite it read: "People are no damn good."

"At one time these drawings were used commercially nearly everywhere," Malden said. "On cocktail napkins, coasters, what-have-you. I still see them on occasion."

Personally I didn't see anything to get excited about, but Malden evidently thought them something special. I slipped the book into my pocket, and he didn't object.

"We live in different worlds," I said. "I can't remember ever seeing them."

"I can see the missing picture vividly," he said. "A cross-eyed, frigid old maid with braids and she was saying: 'Mother loved me but she died.' It was one of my favorites."

"Why?"

That stopped him.

"To be honest, I don't really know—I never gave it any thought. I guess it struck a note of—"

He paused and I prodded him.

"Of what?" I asked.

"Well—of recognition."

I let it drop and changed the subject. "What did you make of the first Deer Hill murder?"

"A number of things, though I might have made much more out of it if I'd known the message. That message opens up a whole realm of possibilities. Apparently the murderer was overly dependent on his mother—"

Why had he said *his* when the message had been written in lipstick and the cartoon was that of a woman?

"No doubt she made him dependent, was too possessive. Then she died, and he considered her death a betrayal."

"Could it be that he recognized she'd made him dependent, that he considered her death a second betrayal?"

Malden pursed his lips before he answered.

"It's possible," he said, "though I wouldn't say 'recognized.' 'Sensed' rather. It would be one of the things that he'd lock away in his mind, hide from himself."

He paused, and I wanted to say, "And what was *your* mother like, Professor Malden?" But I couldn't bring myself to ask the question.

Instead, I said, "So far as we could determine, no one had reason to harm her, let alone cause her death, or even her disfigurement."

Malden frowned. Then he said, "There was never any doubt about the identification?"

"None."

"Could one of the murders be a cover for the other? Or for a murder yet to come?"

"It's unlikely, though I admit the messages calling attention to both crimes do suggest it."

"Probably someone who thinks he's too clever to be caught."

"Delusions of grandeur?"

"You could call it that. Delusions are common enough and of various

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types. For example, a man once complained of the sound of church bells when in reality he was jealous because a clergyman's poetry had been preferred over his own. Because he was ashamed of his jealousy, there was a transference in his mind from 'poetry' to 'bells.'"

I made a note of this, and he waited till I had finished.

"The second Deer Hill murder," he continued, "was that of a man and his wife whose car went off the road at the same spot. Both bodies were mutilated, and again there was a message scrawled in lipstick. What was it this second time?"

"'Put out the light, and then put out the light.' It's from *Othello*," I added. "I looked it up. Othello is considering extinguishing the candle, then murdering Desdemona."

Professor Malden seemed to look deep into the past to envision the quotation.

"Put out the light, and then put out the light:
If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,
I can again thy former light restore
Should I repent me. But once put out thy light,
Thou cunning'st paragon of excelling nature,
I know not where is that Promethean fire
That can thy light relume."

Except for "paragon" instead of "pattern," and "fire" instead of "heat," he had it perfectly. I'd read it over more than a dozen times; but hearing Malden recite it now, gave it new meaning. I liked the two changes. But was there perhaps some hidden meaning in them? A *transference* as he had called it?

"What do you make of it?" I asked.

"There was no candle, but two bodies. He wanted them both dead."

"How do you figure that?"

"He mutilated both." Then a thought struck him. "Was there any relation between the second couple and the first woman?"

"None. The woman was local—the couple came from out of town. I checked that angle myself, but couldn't tie them together. The husband and wife were on vacation, just passing through, and so far as we could learn had no enemies."

"There's a pattern in it, though," Malden said. "The locale's the same, the means, the mutilation, the lipstick message. What about the time—the day of the month, the hour of the day?"

"The same in both murders. And both times, so far as we could tell, there was no attempt at robbery."

"I hadn't thought of that—but it fits."

"What do we have then? Someone overdependent on his mother, a possessive type who made him deliberately so, and the mother's life and death a double betrayal."

Malden took it from there. "Though released by his mother's death, he probably sought a mother-image in marriage—someone else on

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whom he could be dependent. But no doubt his wife proved a disappointment to him, still another betrayal, just as he must have been a disappointment to her. There might even have been another man—there often is in such cases. And that would be the final betrayal."

"Being the same in both murders, aren't the place, the means, the time bound to have—"

But Malden anticipated me.

"That's it, Cochran! Check the records of *past* accidents on Deer Hill—on that day of the month, perhaps at that hour!"

He was pleased with himself that I hated to do it.

"It's not necessary," I said quietly. "I already know. I knew before I came."

He frowned to show his bewilderment.

"If you knew, why did you come to me?" Then in afterthought: "But who was killed?"

"Your wife."

"My *wife?* I have no wife."

"Not now—nor any memory of her either, just as you have no memory of my coming here a year ago to tell you of her death."

The implication was all too clear as disbelief shadowed his face; but then, almost immediately, comprehension seemed to light it.

"But it's you—" he began, then stopped.

I continued, "You showed me in as you did today, and I sat in this very same chair and told you that she and Professor Thompson had been killed in an accident on Deer Hill. You'd just come from the university, where you'd been attending a symposium, and had found her note saying that she was leaving you. From the way you talked about it, matter-of-factly, without the least emotion, one would have thought they'd just gone to the corner store for a loaf of bread." I paused, then went on, "You said to me, 'I started to call him *friend*, but can you call a man who steals your wife a friend?' Then you said, 'I guess it depends—' and left the words dangling in mid-air."

Malden shook his head slowly from side to side, his eyes wide but unseeing, as if he were struggling to recall something lost in the past. I could sense the doors being unlocked and thrown open in his mind. Maybe it was only my imagination, but I could hear the turn of the key, the creak of the hinges.

I didn't think, from what he'd said, that the doors could be opened so quickly, so easily; but knowing the workings of the mind as he did, he might have taken what I'd said on faith.

At any rate, after a moment he said, "Excuse me, Sergeant," and left the room.

It was so natural, so matter-of-fact, that it was some time before I realized what he intended. I should have known, should have stopped him. What would it be, I wondered.

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Poison? A razor? A gun? Bathroom or bedroom?

By then I was moving quietly and quickly.

But he wasn't doing what I expected him to be doing. He was in the bedroom, on the phone.

"Hurry!" I heard him say. "I remember now. He came here a year ago, after his wife's death, to return one of Thompson's books. Professor Thompson, the man she'd run away with, had roomed with me. Mrs. Cochran was an ambitious woman. She'd been in one of my classes, had met Thompson through me.

"No doubt in his investigation Cochran discovered the truth, and the shock caused a transference from his wife to me—a crusty, old bachelor. Evidently he feels *I'm* responsible, thinks *I'm*—"

He glanced up then and caught sight of my reflection in the dresser mirror.

"Oh, dear God!" he cried. "Help me! Help—"

Reaching into my pocket for the lipstick, I knew what I must write: "*People are no damn good!*"

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a new story by

FLETCHER FLORA

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: FLETCHER FLORA

TITLE: *Six Reasons for Murder*

TYPE: Crime and Detection

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Mrs. Bauer saw a perfect way to kill her husband — it was so simple and so clever. And she had six reasons — some motives, some safeguards — and all so reassuring.*

FANNY BAUER HAD AN IDEA HOW to kill Loren. It seemed like a good idea in the beginning, and the more she thought about it the better it looked. She got the idea from watching a late movie on television. This is not intended as a criticism of television, which already gets more than its share, but just shows you how simply a murder can sometimes begin.

If you have to blame someone, blame the Sioux—or the Cheyenne —or was it the Apaches? They were in the movie that Fanny saw, an old Western, and they took the hero, tied him up with wet rawhide thongs, and left him out in the sun. Wet rawhide shrinks as it dries, as almost everyone knows if he will only stop to think about it, and the idea was to make the rawhide cut into the flesh of the hero. It turned out that the hero was rescued by the United States Cavalry, but he was only tied by the wrists and ankles, anyhow, which would have been painful for a while, but not fatal.

What if a wet rawhide thong were tied around someone's throat? Fanny thought.

She kept it impersonal to start with, sort of academic, and it wasn't until later that the throat became Loren's. She didn't know if the Sioux—or Cheyenne or Apaches—had ever used this method to strangle a captive, for it wasn't in the movie; but she did have a vague memory of having read about it in

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a mystery story sometime or other. The movie merely stirred up the memory of the story and so she couldn't claim any originality for the idea—although it required, after all, a certain amount of cleverness to apply it.

And Loren Bauer was certainly an ideal subject. Or victim.

In the first place, as a retired political boss with a severe deficiency of ethics, he had made at least a hundred bitter enemies who would gladly strangle him if given the chance.

In the second place, he was now relatively vulnerable, having had a stroke that left him with legs that were practically useless.

In the third place, he was always taking some kind of drug for the relief of his physical discomfort or his conscience or both, and it would be quite easy to give him enough to knock him out, although not enough actually to kill him, because of what might be discovered *post mortem*.

In the fourth place, he was rich.

In the fifth place, it was beginning to look as if he were going on indefinitely refusing to die naturally, for his heart was sound, in spite of the stroke, and he adhered rigidly to his low cholesterol diet and had given up smoking.

In the sixth place, he was too old for Fanny by some thirty years, and it was high time he was discarded, if not replaced.

Six reasons for murder. Fanny could probably have added a few more, if pressed, but surely six were enough. She decided, after much thought, that she would discuss the matter in general terms with Stuart, who was Loren's nephew. As a matter of fact, Stuart might have been Fanny's seventh reason.

"I've thought of a way to kill Loren," she said to Stuart one day.

"Your rate of production is low," he said. "I've thought of a dozen ways."

"If you're so clever, why haven't you done something about it."

"Thinking and doing are two different things, honey. Doing is far too risky."

"Well, my way, if properly executed, is hardly risky at all."

"I'm intrigued, to say the least. What way do you have in mind?"

"I don't believe I'll tell you. You're rather weak, however charming, and you'd only be a handicap in a touchy project like this."

This suited Stuart perfectly. He always preferred, if possible, to profit from the efforts of others. As for Fanny, the brief conversation had the effect of making a plan, and the very next time she was downtown she went to a small leather shop on a side street and bought a strip of rawhide to be used, she explained, as a lacing. A minimum of research had taught her that rawhide was frequently used as lacing, and the purchase was routine.

She took the strip of rawhide home and put it in a basin in the

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basement to soak. It was necessary, of course, to wait for an appropriate day.

The year was still in the first half of June, and it had been, morever, unusually cool. Then, just when one might have expected warmer weather, it began to rain, and it rained steadily for almost a week—a gray drizzle every day.

Fanny was impatient to get something accomplished, now that she had made a decision, and she was about to despair of ever having a warm fair day. She listened to the weather forecast each evening on radio and television, and even verified the daily forecasts by consulting the evening paper.

Finally, of course, the wet spell ended, and the mercury in thermometers began to climb, and the days became as appropriate as she could possibly ask for—appropriate for murder.

The day she chose was a Saturday. The cook and the maid left at noon for the remainder of the week-end, and Loren himself, ironically enough, made a certainty of what had been, so far, no more than a plan. He had his lunch in his wheelchair in the library, which was used for almost anything except reading, and later, just before the servants left, Fanny went in to get his tray and take it back to the kitchen.

"Do you know what?" he said.

"No," Fanny said. "What?"

"I believe I'll sit out in the sun for a while."

Fanny was, naturally, quite pleased and excited by this opportunity, which required no clever maneuvering on her part; but she was careful not to seem too eager.

"It's pretty warm out there," she said. "In the eighties."

"That's all right. I need some sun for a change. I'll come in when I've had enough."

"Would you like me to push you out on the terrace?"

"Don't bother. I can manage by myself."

"I tell you what I'll do. I'll fix you a tall cold drink of something and bring it out to you. Would you like that?"

He said he would, which was his mistake, and Fanny went to fix him a tall cold anesthetic highball that contained incidental ingredients of citrus juice and gin and carbonated water. As a gesture of innocence, she asked the maid to take it to him on her way out of the house for the week-end, and five minutes later, seeing the cook off, she found the glass already half empty when she went out herself.

"It's such a warm day," she said, "I think I'll go out to the Country Club and have a swim in the pool. Do you mind?"

"Go right ahead," he said.

"You'll be all alone if I do."

"I like being alone."

"You aren't expecting anyone?"

"No, I'm not. And if anyone comes, I'll pretend I'm not here. You run along. Call Stuart to come

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pick you up, if you like. Being an escort is about all he's good for."

"That's a good idea. It's better than my going alone."

She went inside and phoned Stuart. It took him quite a while to answer the telephone, because he wasn't up yet. Stuart was hardly ever out of bed before early afternoon, and Fanny had counted on this when she called.

Stuart agreed to pick her up, although he was somewhat less than enthusiastic about taking a swim, and it took him slightly longer than half an hour to dress and get there.

In the meanwhile Fanny used the time profitably. Returning to the terrace, having detoured en route by way of the basement, she found the tall glass empty and Loren dead to this world if not yet alive in the next. He was, indeed, in such a deep sleep that it gave her a little shock of fear. She was afraid she had been too generous with the drug, and it would never do to have him dying because of that. It couldn't reasonably be passed off as heart failure, not with Loren's recent electrocardiograms on record, and the excess of drugs would certainly be detected in an autopsy.

But after a close inspection she was satisfied that she was safe. Loren would not die of the drug, and any dose less than lethal would surely be accepted as normal, for he took the stuff all the time, as was well known.

And so, satisfied, she had merely to tie the wet rawhide strip snugly around Loren's throat. It was easy to do—Loren was wearing an open-neck sports shirt. Then she carried the tall glass inside, washed it and dried it and put it away, and went upstairs to get a beach bag, into which she put a black swimming suit, brief, a striped towel, immense, and a tube of suntan lotion, economy size. She was waiting downstairs, ready to go, when Stuart arrived.

He was so grumpy from having been wakened early that Fanny was tempted to tell him what she had done, just to cheer him up a little; but she decided that it wouldn't be wise. She resisted temptation all the way to the Country Club, and finally compromised, as they were arriving, by hinting at just enough to give him something pleasant to anticipate.

"I have a notion," she said, "that there is going to be a happy surprise in your life today."

"Yes?" He looked at her disagreeably. "What are you, an astrologer or something?"

"You'll see," she said. "You need only be a little patient."

She wouldn't tell him any more, not a word, but his humor did improve, and they had a cool pleasant swim in the pool and sat for a while in deck chairs along the side. It was really quite warm in the sun, and so they dressed pretty soon and moved into the clubhouse, where they had cold drinks and

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played several hands of gin rummy. All in all, it was quite a pleasant afternoon that passed quickly, and it was a little later than Fanny had planned when Stuart got her home again.

"Come in and say hello to Loren," Fanny said.

"Well, I don't want to, but I suppose I'd better," he said.

They walked inside together and Fanny went off ostensibly to look for Loren. She ran upstairs and down again. She looked into several rooms. She called his name. At last, after putting on a good show, she went out to the terrace—and all of a sudden she had the most terrible feeling that things had gone wrong and that Loren would be alive and waiting for her.

But as it turned out, the feeling was no more than a foolish apprehension, for the rawhide had shrunk, as guaranteed by the old Western, and Loren was stone dead.

Working as fast as she could, Fanny began trying to remove the strip of rawhide from Loren's throat. But it had drawn deeply into the flesh and had become very hard in the sun, and for a fearful moment she thought she might have to call Stuart to help her remove it. Then she remembered the penknife that Loren invariably carried in his pocket.

She finished out the knife, cut the rawhide, and dropped it and the knife into her beach bag, which she had carried all this time. Then, feeling relieved and composed, she went back into the house and found Stuart waiting where she had left him.

"Loren is still out on the terrace," she said. "He seems to be dead. You had better call the police."

"Police!" Stuart jumped and stared at her. "Why the devil should I call the police?"

"If I'm not mistaken, Loren has been murdered. Strangled, I believe. He had many enemies, you know. Apparently one of them slipped up behind him and choked him to death."

"Oh, sure!" Stuart's eyes, which had popped wide open, were now narrowed. "This wouldn't be the happy surprise you were talking about, would it?"

"Please don't waste time, Stuart. Are you going to call the police, or aren't you?"

"I am *not*. What I'm going to do is get out of here immediately."

"Don't be absurd. You can't possibly be involved, and neither can I. After all, we were away together all afternoon. Besides, it will only look worse for you if you leave."

"Not if you don't tell anyone I was here."

"I'll certainly have to tell the police. You know very well that it's illegal to withhold information in a murder case."

"It's also illegal to strangle husbands."

"I haven't strangled a husband—not mine nor anyone else's. Stuart,

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do as I say. Go and call the police immediately."

"Well, it looks like I'm hooked, and I'll have to."

"That's a good boy. In the meantime, I'll go up to my room and lie down. It's expected of widows to behave properly in these matters, and I don't want to create a bad impression—especially for the police."

She went upstairs, carrying her beach bag. In her room she hung the bag on a hook far back in her closet, then kicked off her shoes and lay down on the bed. She was inwardly far too excited to continue lying there, however, and after a while she got up and sat in a chair by a window.

She wished that the window overlooked the terrace so that she could watch what would go on down there; but the terrace was on the other side of the house. It would be necessary, she thought to dispose of the strip of rawhide, but there would be plenty of time for that later. Meanwhile it would be safe enough where it was, in the beach bag, for there was no reason in the world why anyone should look into it, or even think of looking.

Now that it was so nearly finished, she felt a great urgency to have it finished altogether. She sat quietly, listening for sounds, but she could hear nothing in the big house and see nothing pertinent from the window. After a long time she began to suspect that Stuart had not even called the police as he was instructed to do. She was almost ready to go downstairs and see for herself if he was still there or had sneaked away like a coward, when there was suddenly, without the prelude of any other sound, a brisk rapping on her door and a voice that sounded somehow official.

"Mrs. Bauer. Are you there?"

"Yes," she said. "Who is it, please?"

"Lieutenant Peavy. Police. I'd like to talk with you if you feel up to it."

"Of course. Just a moment."

She stood up and put on her shoes and opened the door.

"I've been lying down," she said.

"I understand. Are you sure you're ready to talk?"

"Quite ready."

"Will you come downstairs, or would you prefer to talk here?"

"Here, if you don't mind. Please come in."

She crossed to the bed and sat on the edge of it, while he pulled the chair around from the window and sat facing her. As a policeman, she thought, he looked remarkably inoffensive. To be perfectly candid, from her particular point of view, he looked relatively safe if not inept. He was slight of build, with limp brown hair brushed over from the side, and his tired suit hung loosely on his body. He held his hands clasped between his knees, as if he were embarrassed and uncertain of himself.

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"I wonder," he said, "if you would just tell me just what happened."

"There isn't much to tell, really. I've been away this afternoon. I went swimming at the Country Club with Mr. Bauer's nephew. I believe you met him downstairs. When we left here, Loren was sitting on the terrace in the sun. He was going to wheel himself inside when he'd had enough. Stuart and I didn't return until rather late, and I found Loren still on the terrace. You know how he was when I found him."

"Yes. Dead. Strangled. Tell me, Mrs. Bauer, did you see the weapon?"

"The weapon?"

"Yes. Whatever was used to strangle him. From the appearance of his throat it must have been a very stout cord or a steel wire. Something like that."

"I didn't see it whatever it was. The murderer must have taken it away with him. Wouldn't he naturally do that?"

"He might. He might not. In this case, he did. Or he didn't. What I mean is, the weapon was taken away—but not at the time of the murder. It remained in place around the victim's throat all the time he was on the terrace. *Until you came home, Mrs. Bauer?*"

"What's that? What did you say?"

Lieutenant Peavy twisted his hands together, giving the impression of wringing them in an agony of embarrassment.

"I see that you got the beginning of a tan on your face and throat this afternoon, Mrs. Bauer. So did your husband. *Except on the narrow line around his throat that the sun didn't touch.* Can you explain that?"

She couldn't, of course. She couldn't even try. She wondered desperately if she could somehow put the blame on Stuart, but it didn't seem likely. Most of all, she wondered how she could have failed to think of such a simple thing while being so clever about everything else. Now they would certainly search her room and look into her beach bag—and there was not a thing she could do to prevent it.

What was Peavy saying?

"I've been trying to figure out how you did it, Mrs. Bauer," he was saying, "and I think I've got it." His expression was almost ludicrously apologetic. "You see, I watch the late movies on television too."

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A MAN IS MISSING

by ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

(*Continued from page 48*)

Hank pulled back the flap of the envelope and took out the single sheet of paper, which was covered on both sides with fine pen-and-ink writing. He spread it out on the table.

Marion, standing at his shoulder, read the letter with him.

"My name is Frank Adrian, although until the last few days there was a great deal I couldn't remember about myself. I am married to Corliss Latham Adrian, and I will put her address at the bottom of this letter, so the finder may notify her in the event it becomes necessary.

"I have been subject to attacks of amnesia. Some time ago I had an attack which sent me wandering away from home. For a while I didn't know who I was, then I could remember only a part of my life. There was a hiatus following an automobile accident in which I received a blow on the head. However, recently my mind has cleared, and I know now who I am.

"For some time I have been engaged in a partnership with a chap named Harry Benton, a man who is an experienced woodsman, packer, and prospector. We came up here to this cabin to do some prospecting until the weather got cold and then do some trapping.

"I have heard something about cabin fever, that peculiar malady which grips two persons who are forced into constant association with each other, until finally they become so thoroughly annoyed and irritated that a species of insanity is generated.

"I had never thought that could happen to me.

"I am all right, but my partner, Harry Benton, has developed a bad case of cabin fever. He hates me with an insane, bitter hatred. I think the man is crazy.

"A few days ago we had a quarrel over a matter so trivial it seemed absurd to me, but I can see that Benton has become absolutely furious and is brooding over it. I am going to try and leave here, but I am still pretty much of a tenderfoot and it will be a hard trip for me. I feel certain that if Benton finds I have run out on him he will track me down and kill me. Therefore I want to get enough of a head start so he can't catch up with me.

"If the worst should come to the worst and anything should happen, will the finder of this letter please notify my wife."

The letter was signed, "Frank Adrian," and below that was the address of his wife.

Hank looked up at Marion Benton.

"Why, how absolutely absurd!" she exclaimed. "The man must be insane. Harry never was a bit like that."

"Cabin fever *is* a peculiar thing," Hank said. "I've seen people that were just as nice as could be. They'd be swell campmates until they got cabin fever and—well, it *is* a kind of insanity. You can't—"

"Oh, bosh and nonsense! Harry has

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camped with people all over the country. He's been out in the hills as much as you have. It's absolutely absurd to think of Harry flying off the handle that way."

"Of course, a tenderfoot is something of a trial to live with," Hank pointed out. "There are times when just wrangling them gets you to the point where—"

"But, Hank, that's absolutely foolish. I don't know why this man wrote that letter, but it's absurd."

"Well," Hank said, "let's go on back and stop the pack train. We'll camp around here somewhere and then take a closer look at the cabin. Everything seems to be all nice and shipshape."

Marion nodded, too stunned and angry to engage in much conversation.

Hank looked carefully around the place for a while, then said, "Oh—oh, what's this?"

"What?"

Hank turned to one of the walls. Down near the floor were reddish-brown stains which had evidently spattered against the wood in pear-shaped drops, then had dried.

Marion looked at the stains, then raised her eyes to Hank. "Hank, is it—"

Hank nodded and said, "I guess we'd better close up the place and go get the others."

It was well along in the afternoon when Marion Chandler Benton, Corliss Adrian, James Dewitt, and Hank Lucas returned to the cabin. In the meantime they had found a camping place, and left Kenney and the cook to unpack the horses and make camp.

Lucas had briefly described what they had found and had shown the others the letter. Marion had announced to one and all that she was Harry Benton's sister and had ridiculed the letter.

James Dewitt had accepted the announcement of her relationship to Frank Adrian's partner without surprise. He had, however, promptly taken sides with Mrs. Adrian.

"You don't suppose Frank Adrian wrote that letter just for fun, do you?" he said.

"He was a tenderfoot," Marion said. "He wasn't accustomed to living out in the hills with anyone. Harry was probably a little taciturn, and Frank took it for cabin fever."

"Well, if nothing happened to him, and it was all a mistake," Dewitt said, "why hasn't his wife heard from him?"

"Because he has amnesia. He's had another lapse of memory."

"Could be," Dewitt said, in a tone that failed to show any conviction. "Since we're taking off the masks, I may as well tell you I'm a detective in charge of the missing persons department of—Well, here, take a look at my credentials, all of you."

"*Please* let's get started," Corliss Adrian said. "I don't want to make any trouble for anyone. All I want is to find Frank. Please let's go."

When they arrived at the cabin, Dewitt inspected the reddish-brown stains on the wall and promptly took charge. "Those stains are blood," he said. "Now, let's be careful not to disturb anything in the cabin. Hank, show me exactly where it was you found the letter."

Hank Lucas replaced the letter behind the boxes. "Right here," he said. "It was sticking out just about like this."

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"As much as that?"

"That's right. Just about like this."

"I see. Let's look at this stove."

Hank said, "Doesn't seem to be any firewood or kindling here, but I can go out and get some dry wood and in just a few minutes have this whole cabin heated up."

"Definitely not," Dewitt said. "We'll leave everything exactly as it is, except that we'll look through these ashes down below the grate here."

Dewitt found a piece of flat tin from which he made a scoop, and began shoveling the ashes. After the second shovelful he gave an exclamation.

There were four or five badly charred buttons in the ashes.

"I guess you folks better get out," Dewitt said to Corliss and Marion. "It's beginning to look bad. You girls wait outside. We don't want any evidence obliterated. You'd better wait over there by the door, Hank. This is a case where too many cooks spoil the broth. I know exactly what to do and how to do it. Remember, this is right down my alley."

Corliss and Marion went outside. Corliss was crying, Marion indignant. Hank strolled off down the trail, which he said probably led to a spring.

There followed a period of waiting in an atmosphere of hostility. Marion and Corliss sat on a fallen log, maintaining a distance of some eight feet, both apparently intent on the scenery, both under emotional tension.

Then Hank Lucas came walking back rather hurriedly. He talked briefly to Dewitt. The men took off, carrying with them a shovel which had been standing in the corner of the cabin by the stove.

Corliss apparently failed to appreciate the significance of Hank's errand, but Marion waited, watching with fear-strained eyes as the men walked rapidly down the path toward the spring.

When they returned, twenty minutes later, Marion knew what had happened merely from their attitudes. Dewitt, bustling in his efficiency, was now very definitely in charge. Hank, coming along behind him carrying the shovel, had a dejected droop to his shoulders.

Dewitt said, "Corliss, we want you."

She came to him, and Dewitt engaged in low-voiced conversation, glancing almost surreptitiously at Marion. Marion saw Corliss catch her breath, heard her half scream; then they were gone down the trail. They were back within ten minutes. The cold hostility of Dewitt's eyes confirmed her worst fears.

He said, "It's my duty to inform you, Miss Benton, that we have discovered the body of Frank Adrian. The evidence is unmistakable that he was shot in the back of the head with a high-powered rifle, firing a soft-nosed bullet. In view of other evidence I've found, there can be no question but what your brother was the murderer."

Marion was on her feet. "How dare you say any such thing! You are making a superficial appraisal of circumstantial evidence. My brother may have been living with him, but he wasn't the only man in these mountains. After all, Adrian was mentally deranged. He—"

"Shot himself in the back of the head with a *rifle?*" Dewitt asked sarcastically.

"Well, I guess there are other people in these mountains. My brother and

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Adrian might have found a rich mine and—"

"That," Dewitt said coldly, "is something you can try to prove to a jury *after we've caught your brother.*"

"Or," Marion went on desperately, "that body could be someone else."

"The identification is absolute," Dewitt said. "Not only is there an identification by Corliss despite the state of the body due to the time it's been in a shallow grave, but there are certain means of identification which were given me by Corliss before she ever came in here. There's no question about the identity of the body. And as far as my duty is concerned, it's plain. Your brother is a fugitive from justice. He has a head start—too big a head start. But there seems to be no question as to the trail he took in going out, and I am going to ride over that trail. There's a telephone at the other end of it."

Hank Lucas was downright apologetic when he moved up to talk with Marion after Dewitt had gone over to comfort Corliss. "There's another way out of this country," he said. "It's only about fifteen miles of trail from here, and gets you to an automobile road. There's a ranch there and a telephone. Dewitt feels he should get in there right away, and I've got to guide him. Corliss is pretty much all in, but she doesn't want to remain here."

"Hank, tell me," Marion said tearfully. "I don't trust this man on the evidence. He's a prejudiced, overbearing, bullying—"

"He's a pretty good detective," Hank Lucas said. "As far as the evidence he's uncovered is concerned, Marion, there are half a dozen clues that tell the whole story."

"And the body's that of Frank Adrian?"

"Doesn't seem to be any question about that . . . We don't feel that it's right for you to hang around the cabin the way things are. Don't you want to go back to camp and stay there with Kenney and the cook?"

"I don't. I want to get out of this country. I want to get away," Marion said, feeling her voice rise almost to the point of hysteria. "I want to talk with someone who's got some sense. I want to find the Sheriff of this county."

"That's right," Lucas said, soothingly. "The Sheriff is a square shooter, but there's no use kidding ourselves. So far, the evidence is dead open and shut."

"If they accuse Harry of this I'll get the best lawyer money can buy," Marion stormed indignantly.

"Now, don't go making any mistake on that," Hank said. "That's where you really *could* get in bad. Don't go get any high-priced city lawyer and bring him in here to this county. You take the run-of-the-mill country lawyer up here, and he understands cabin fever. The jury understands cabin fever, and the lawyer understands the jury—"

"We're wasting time," Dewitt interrupted. "We haven't too much daylight left. We'll have to ride fast. Think it will be necessary to take a pack horse with our sleeping bags?"

"Nope," Hank said. "There's a ranger station there and a ranch. We can get them to put us up for the night. But I think probably we can get an auto to drive out from Boise and pick us up."

"Let's get started," Dewitt said.

"This is going to be tough" Hank warned.

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Dewitt was grim. "We can take it. This is part of the day's work—my work."

It wasn't until shortly after dark that the four horsemen rounded the last turn of a trail that had seemed absolutely interminable and saw an oblong of light and heard the sound of a radio.

Corliss Adrian was virtually in a state of collapse. Dewitt, holding grimly to the saddle horn, lurched along like a sack of meal. Marion, accustomed as she was to a proper seat in the saddle, was unspeakably weary. Only Hank Lucas seemed at ease and untired.

Once in the ranger station, however, Dewitt's spirits soon revived. He was in his element, putting through telephone calls, requisitioning cars, assuming command. And Marion had to admit reluctantly that as an executive he showed considerable ability.

While they were waiting for the car to arrive from Boise, Ted Meeker, the rancher who lived about half a mile away and who had arrived in a state of excitement after quite frankly having listened over the party phone, fell into conversation with Hank.

"How's the stock coming?" Hank asked.

"Pretty good. There certainly is lots of feed in this meadow during about eight months of the year."

"How are the horses?"

"Fine."

"Got any you want to sell?"

Meeker grinned. "None you'd want to buy."

"Haven't had a stray in here, have you?"

"Say, there is, for a fact," Meeker said. "When the horses came in to hay last winter, there was a black that came in. Big, powerful horse. I haven't seen him before, and I don't know who owns him. There's no brand."

"White left front foot? Star on his forehead?" Hank asked, rolling a cigarette deftly with one hand.

"That's right."

"Back in good shape?" Hank asked casually.

"It is now," Meeker said, and laughed. "Wasn't quite so good when he came in."

"Maybe fifteen years old? Sort of swaybacked?" Lucas asked.

"Don't tell me you own him?"

"Nope. But I know who does."

"Well, by this time the owner's got a feed bill."

Marion listened absent-mindedly to this conversation, not quite understanding its implications. As the sister of an accused murderer, she found herself in the position of being apart from the little group. She knew, in fact, that Dewitt had even disliked having her in the room where she could listen to the telephone instructions which had gone out pertaining to the apprehension of Harry Benton. It was a welcome relief, therefore, when she heard the sound of an automobile motor and realized that they would be on the move again.

The drive to the county seat was a long one, and it was nearly noon when the party finally reported to Bill Catlin. They were all exhausted.

The old country Sheriff eyed them curiously. His manner was calm, unhurried, and deliberate. "Looks to me like you've been takin' it pretty hard," he said to Dewitt. "Maybe you'd better roll in for a while before we do anything else."

Dewitt squared his shoulders. "I can't sleep when there are a lot of

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things to be done. I won't rest until I know every wheel has been set in motion."

"Well, now, we can take over from here," the Sheriff assured him philosophically.

Dewitt shook his head. "I don't want to appear conceited, but it just happens I'm here. I'm going to keep on the job."

Bill Catlin said, somewhat whimsically, "Guess us country boys wouldn't do so well in the city."

Dewitt smiled.

"On the other hand," Catlin said, "we manage to get by out here in our country."

"I hope," Dewitt said, "that the time will come when we have a city-trained man available in every county in the United States."

"Well, now, that just *might* be a good thing," Bill said.

Dewitt's voice was rasping from fatigue. "Well, let's finish up this case if you don't mind."

"You mean finish it up right now?"

"That's right. Arrest one of the guilty parties."

"Who?"

"Use your head," Dewitt said impatiently. "Reconstruct the crime. Put two and two together."

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"Hank Lucas tells me he knows that pack horse, has known it for some time. He knows the man who sold it to Adrian."

Catlin nodded.

"That pack horse showed up down by the ranger station after snowfall last year when the horses came in to get fed. He'd been feeding out on the range before then."

Again Catlin nodded.

"Surely you can see what happened," Dewitt went on, trying to restrain his impatience. "There in the cabin we found some buttons in the stove, meaning that some garments had been burned up. We didn't find a single thing in the line of wearing apparel, blankets, personal possessions, or anything—just a few dishes and odds and ends of that sort. In other words, the cabin had been fixed up very carefully so that any person who happened to stumble onto it wouldn't think there was anything out of the ordinary. It would appear that the trappers who had been in it had taken their furs at the end of the winter season and gone on out to sell them."

"So Hank was telling me," the Sheriff said.

"All right," Dewitt said. "Benton killed Frank Adrian. He loaded all the stuff on the pack horse and walked out to the ranch by the ranger station, where he struck the highway. He unpacked the horse and turned him loose."

"Then what?" Catlin asked.

"Then he vanished."

"Seems like he did, for a fact," the Sheriff said.

"Well," Dewitt nearly exploded. "My God, do I have to rub your nose in it? Figure out what happened. That wasn't any cabin-fever killing. That was willful, premeditated murder. Adrian had quite a roll of cash on him. Benton got out with it. What happened? He got to that road and unpacked his pack horse. He didn't just evaporate into thin air. Someone met him with an automobile. It had to be someone who was in on the play, someone who could keep an eye on things and wait until people were about ready

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to launch an investigation, and then contrive to show up and be very solicitous about her 'dear brother.' In other words, it's just as plain as the nose on your face that Marion Benton was her brother's accomplice, and the murder of Frank Adrian was premeditated."

Marion jumped to her feet. "How dare you say anything like that?"

"Now, just a minute, ma'am," Bill Catlin said authoritatively. "If you wouldn't mind just sitting down and keeping quiet, I'll ask you questions when I get around to it. But right now we're having an official investigation, and Mr. Dewitt is doing the talking."

Marion subsided into the chair.

Corliss Adrian said to the Sheriff, "He could have hitchhiked in. *I* don't think Miss Benton was in on it."

"Don't be silly, Corliss," Dewitt said. "I can appreciate your desire to be charitable. Miss Benton has imposed on all of us with her superb job of acting, but I'm looking at the thing from the standpoint of a trained investigator."

Marion started to say something, but the Sheriff motioned her to silence.

"Figure it out," Dewitt went on. "That murder was committed some time before snow, some time before the ground froze. The men had gone in there planning to prospect and then to trap. They had taken in enough supplies to last them through the winter—probably all the supplies they could possibly load on one pack horse. There must have been quite a bit of stuff. Benton had to load all that and pack it out. Then he had to get rid of it.

"I've asked particularly about traffic along that road. Except during hunting season, there's virtually no one who uses it other than the ranger and the chap who has the ranch there, plus the man who delivers the mail.

"I try to do things thoroughly. I've talked on the telephone to the mailman, and I asked him particularly if he remembered picking up anyone with a lot of camp equipment."

"Couldn't he have hidden the camp equipment?" Corliss asked.

"Too dangerous," Dewitt said shortly. "There must have been a lot of provisions which had to be disposed of some way—bacon, flour, sugar, coffee. Then there were blankets and traps. To simply dump that stuff out somewhere would be taking too big a chance. The minute anyone found that cache of stuff, he'd know something had happened."

Sheriff Catlin nodded approvingly. "You're doing right well," he said.

"I think you'll find," Dewitt told him, with some dignity, "that the basic principles of investigating a crime both in the city and in the country are the same. In the country you have, perhaps, a wider area, which tends to increase the difficulty of finding clues. But, on the other hand, you have a smaller population, which makes the job of finding what you want much more simple."

"Yes, I reckon you're right," the Sheriff said. "You've done some good reasoning there. I guess he couldn't hitchhike. I guess he had to have someone meet him."

"And you can see what *that* means," Dewitt went on. "It means deliberate murder. The crime had to be committed according to a certain schedule. The person with the car had to be there on a certain date. It's your county, Sheriff, and I don't want to

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dictate, but if it comes to a showdown, I'm going to have to. I want Miss Benton arrested as one of the two persons who murdered Frank Adrian. I want her arrested now."

The Sheriff turned to Marion Benton. "Miss Benton, if you don't mind, I'd like to ask you a question or two. I know it's sort of embarrassing, but you'll help things along a bit if you'll just talk frankly . . . Your brother is sort of wild, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Done quite a lot of camping and packing?"

"A lot."

"Lived in the hills a good part of his life?"

"Yes."

"Pretty good prospector?"

"Yes."

"Trapper?"

"Yes."

"Hank tells me you sit a horse pretty good. Take it you've done quite a bit of riding in the mountains, haven't you?"

"Some."

"With your brother?"

"Yes."

"Your brother have anyone along to do the packing or anything when he took those trips?"

"No, of course not. He likes to do it."

The Sheriff turned back to Dewitt. "Now, then, Hank tells me," he said, "that when you found the cabin there was a shovel on the inside of the cabin by the stove, some blood spots on one of the walls, but no other blood spots anywhere. There were dishes in the little cupboard—dishes that had been washed and put away. There wasn't any firewood or kindling inside the cabin. The stove had ashes that hadn't been cleaned out, and there were some buttons in the ashes. There was this here note that had been stuck behind the boxes that formed the cupboard, and there wasn't a single, solitary thing left in the cabin to show that, of the two men who occupied that cabin, one of them had stayed behind. The pack horse was found at the end of the trail, some skinned-up places on his back."

Dewitt nodded, then said somewhat impatiently. "I've gone all over that before. Hang it, Sheriff, I've given that cabin my *personal* attention. I've *seen* the evidence."

"Well, you've looked at the cabin," the Sheriff said. "Sometimes we don't always see what we look at . . . Now, let's see. Mrs. Adrian, you registered over here at the hotel and left some baggage, I believe, to be picked up when you came out of the mountains."

"That's right. Hank told me to make the load as light as I could, just take the things I really needed to get along with."

"Hank tells me you ain't done much mountain riding."

"This is my first trip."

"Now, then," the Sheriff said to Dewitt, "I think you've got it right. This here murderer had to have somebody meet him. That means it was a premeditated crime. It means he had an accomplice. It means the thing was worked out according to schedule."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you," Dewitt snapped, "premeditated murder."

"That's right. But a couple of things you've sort of overlooked. Let's do a little thinking out loud. Take that photographic post card for instance."

"What about it?"

"Notice the shadows?"

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"The shadows! What have the shadows to do with the murder of Frank Adrian?"

"They're pretty short shadows," Catlin said. "The picture must have been taken right at noon, but even so, shadows don't get that short up here in Idaho except during the summer months. Now, Tom Morton, the photographer who printed that picture, put it on paper that he says must have been used up by the last part of July. The shadows say it was July. The post card says it was October. How you going to reconcile the shadows and—"

Dewitt laughed. "I'm not even going to try. Frank Adrian didn't disappear until September."

Bill Catlin nodded and went on calmly, "And this here picture was taken with a folding camera that has a little light leak in the bellows. That's how come this little patch of white fog is down here in the corner. Now, I know I'm just sort of boring you, but there's one more thing you'd ought to consider. Remember when that pack horse showed up, his back had been rubbed raw and then healed over?"

Dewitt said, "For heaven's sake, are you crazy? *I* don't care about the damn' pack horse."

"Well, now," the Sheriff went on, "you'd ought to know the mountains, if you're going to work in 'em. Of course, in packing a lot of dude duffel, even a good man will sometimes get sore backs on one or two of the pack string. You just can't help that. But when you're packing just one horse, and when you're leading him on foot, which is generally a slower proposition than working from horseback, a man that knew about packing wouldn't get a sore back on his pack horse.

"Now, another thing. The murderer tried to leave the cabin so that anybody that happened to stumble onto it wouldn't think there was anything wrong. Everything would seem to be all nice and shipshape, just the way the trappers would have left it at the close of the winter season.

"But up here in this country we have a custom that's an unwritten law. When a man leaves a cabin, he always leaves dry stovewood and kindling in by the stove. That's so that if he happens to come back in a rainstorm or a blizzard, he's got dry wood to start the fire with. And if somebody else happens to come in looking for shelter, there's always dry wood with which to build a fire.

"Now I don't want to bore you by telling you all these local customs, but th' one in particular is pretty rigidly enforced. Now do you get it?"

"Get what?" Dewitt asked.

"There were two men in that cabin. One of them was a tenderfoot, a city dude. The other was a woodsman. One of them killed the other and pulled out. Whoever it was that slicked the cabin up and washed the dishes and made it look as though everything was the way two trappers had left it, certainly wasn't the murdered man; it was the guy who did the killing."

"Naturally," Dewitt said.

"And," Bill Catlin pointed out, "in this case, the man who did that was the tenderfoot."

The idea hit Dewitt suddenly and hard. "But look here," he said. "His wife identified the body. There was a ring on—"

"Sure, sure, she 'identified the body,' " Catlin said. "Naturally, the murderer saw to it that the right ring

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was there to be identified. But *she'd* have made a positive identification in any event. You remember what you said about the crime having to be premeditated and someone having to be at the right place to meet the pack horse on a definite date."

Corliss Adrian pushed her chair back from the table. "Are you," she demanded angrily, "trying to insinuate that I—?"

"Now, just take it easy, ma'am," the Sheriff said. "I'm trying to straighten Dewitt out on the facts of this here case . . . One other thing, Dewitt. Hank tells me this note was sticking out from behind the cupboard. I asked him if a good mountain man would have seen it easy, and he said over the telephone, 'My God, Bill, even a dude would have seen it.' So there you are. You see, Adrian was just a little *too* anxious. He wanted to be certain that note would be found.

"Well, now, when Hank telephoned me about this here crime and the things he found, I did some thinking, and then I got hold of the judge and got me a search warrant so I could search the baggage that Mrs. Adrian had left there in the hotel. And, sure enough, there was a 3-A folding camera with a rapid rectilinear lens. And when we took it into Tom Morton's darkroom and put an electric light bulb inside the bellows, you could see that one little pinhole in the bellows just as plain as day . . .

"Now, don't try to make any breaks, Mrs. Adrian. You're all tired out from having a long ride and a long trip. And even if you tried to run away in this country you couldn't get anywhere. It isn't like just ducking outdoors in a city and trying to get lost in a crowd. You've got to stay right here and take your medicine. One thing about it, our menfolks up here are sort of chivalrous to women, and while they won't turn you loose, they may make you sort of an accessory or something that wouldn't quite take the extreme penalty."

"You're crazy," she said. "You've got nothing on me. This is some bucolic travesty of justice."

"I'm afraid we've got quite a bit on you," the Sheriff said. "You and your husband fixed this up quite a while ago. Both of you prospected around last summer and found that cabin. It had been abandoned, but was pretty new and in good shape. You even took that picture when you found the cabin, a month or two before your husband pulled his disappearing act. You've played it pretty foxy. You'd taken out the insurance policies years ago. It was all as slick as a wet pavement."

"Wait a minute," Dewitt said. "Let me handle this, Corliss . . . Sheriff, your own reasoning defeats itself."

"How come?"

"You admit that the man who left that cabin last tried to fix it up so it would look as though the trappers had moved out for the winter."

"That's what Hank told me," the Sheriff said.

"Yet Hank also told you that this note was left in such a prominent place that anyone, even a dude, couldn't have failed to see it."

The Sheriff chuckled. "Well, now, *that's* an interesting thing," he said. "That's the clue that struck me the minute Hank told me about it over the telephone. So I did a little thinking."

"I haven't seen any evidence of it yet," Dewitt said, now openly hostile.

"Well," the Sheriff said, "you have

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to think that one over a little bit. Have to sort of put yourself in the shoes of the murderer, and then you get it."

"I'm afraid," Dewitt said with deep sarcasm, "my mental processes are too far inferior to yours to get these fine points. Suppose you explain *it* to *me*."

"Well, now," the Sheriff said, "just put yourself in the shoes of the murderer. You don't want the body to be discovered until after it's pretty hard to make a positive identification. You've buried the body in a shallow grave. You want it to stay there and decompose for just about so long. Then you're ready to have the thing discovered. Now, then, if it's discovered too soon, you're sunk. Well, you can figure out what that means, Dewitt."

"What does it mean?"

"It means that the murderer, or someone that was in cahoots with him, had to come back to that cabin and put that note there where it would be discovered at just about the right time. The idea was to get someone to go to that cabin, and when he reached the cabin he *had* to find the note and the body. So the person who put the note there wanted to be sure it'd be found. Now, Adrian could have put it there all right, just the way he says. But if Benton had killed him, he'd have seen that note and naturally burnt it up. A mountain man wouldn't have overlooked that note—not in a million years.

"So when Hank told me about the note and about the way it had been found, I asked him about the color of the ink. Seems like the ink was sort of blue. Now, you take ink that way and, as I understand it, there's some sort of a chemical in it that unites with oxygen and turns black after it oxidizes, and that's what gives you the permanent color in ink. But until that chemical has had a chance to oxidize, they put a blue dye in the ink, so you can see what's been written down. That's why ink will be sort of blue for a while and then, after it gets old, it'll turn black. You take a man that's accustomed to judging colors pretty careful, and he can come pretty close to telling whether pen writing is old or new. Hank said this looked pretty new to him.

"Well, that started me thinking some more, and so I asked Hank over the phone how Mrs. Adrian stood the trip. Did she ride pretty good in a saddle? And he said she was just like most of the dudes, riding with short stirrups, gripping with her knees, and pushing back against the cantle of the saddle. So I figured she'd hardly be the kind that could make a quick round trip to the cabin to plant a note in there, and maybe slash her finger and leave some bloodstains around. And the way I sized it up, there was only one other person who could have done it.

"Well, I had a pretty good description of Frank Adrian, thanks to the stuff my friend, Ed Harvel, had sent on. So I sort of figured, if he sneaked into that cabin and put a note in there, he'd have had to go in through the ranger station or down through the Middle Fork. But it would have been a pretty hard trip, because *he* was a tenderfoot, too. And it didn't look like they'd take chances having *three* people in on it. However, they're bringing in a few planes lately, and there's a forest service emergency landing field only about five miles from the cabin now.

"So I got busy on the telephone and

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rang up the cities around that have charter air service, asking them about whether they took a man of a certain description into that landing field within the last month or so. And, sure enough, I struck pay dirt."

"What did you find?" Dewitt asked, interested now despite himself.

"Well," the Sheriff said, "a man chartering an airplane has to give a lot of information about himself. Of course, this man was using an assumed name. He's working in a garage now. Probably thought he was all good and safe, and nobody was going to bother him. Well, I telephoned down to my friend, the Sheriff there, and we picked him up.

"And when I'd picked him up, I talked with him over the phone and told him about how his wife had already collected the insurance money and run away with a playboy, name of Gridley. That was sort of reading her mind a little in advance. May have been sort of a mean trick, but it worked like a charm. This here Adrian has a quick temper, and seems like he really blew up and started talking fast. He'd evidently heard something about this Gridley chap.

"So now, Mrs. Adrian, I hate to do it, but I've just got to give you lodging in the jail. I've sent over to the hotel and had your bags taken over, and while the matron will be watching you to see what you take out, you can get some clean clothes and—My gosh!" Bill Catlin said, his voice edged with sympathy. "Darned if she ain't fainted. Hank, will you wet a towel over there at the washstand, and let's see if we can't snap her out of it? And there's a bottle of whiskey in that locker.

"And I reckon you can use a drink too, Miss Benton. It's too bad about your brother, but, after all, it's better that way than to have him turn out to be a murderer.

"And as far as Ed Harvel's concerned, Dewitt, I rang him up and told him we'd got the case solved and the murderer in jail.

"And now, if you folks feel like it, we'll get Mrs. Adrian disposed of, and then I guess we can have a little something to eat. I've been up pretty nearly all night working on this thing, and I ain't as young as I used to be. When I go without sleep, I've got to have lots of food to keep the energy up.

"I told Harvel you'd done a fine job of detective work up here, Dewitt. And Harvel was proud as punch. 'Course I told him that us country fellows had to put a few little finishing touches on, here and there. Just because it's our county, you know, and the voters sort of look to us to keep things in line. But I told him you'd done most of the work.

"Okay, Hank; let's get the matron over here, and then we'll go down and see what we can find. Deer season's open now, and a friend sent me a loin of venison. I took it down to Ted Collins' place and told him to have things all ready to give us a good venison feed when we showed up.

"Oh, yes, another thing: the insurance companies that had the policies on Adrian's life, in favor of his wife, are pretty grateful. Ed Harvel tells me they want to make sort of a contribution.

"So I guess, come to figure it all out, we done a pretty fair day's work. Whatta ya think, boys?"

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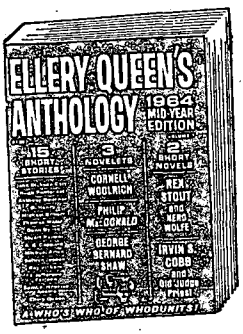

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